













## IF WISHES WERE HORSES

SOME EXTRACTS FROM PRESS NOTICES  
OF "SI MIHI—!" 1907

A charming little book of confessions . . . Egomet has a cultured mind, a pleasing wit, and a dainty fancy.—*South Wales Mercury*.

This group of self-conscious, verbose essays.—*Yorkshire Observer*.

A happy knack of quotation and allusion which cannot fail to recommend his lightly touched pieces of self-portraiture.—*Glasgow Herald*.

We take it that Egomet's frankness is mostly genuine, and his irony only half ironical.—*Birmingham Daily Post*.

A true autobiography of a second-rate soul.—*Morning Post*.

We feel that we are not supposed to know what he means, and that he does not mean it. But there is plenty of Horatian philosophy about the book, not a few definite ideas, and more than a glimmer of originality.—*Irish Times*.

He is merely shallow and—oh! so banal and trite.—*Pall Mall Gazette*.

# IF WISHES WERE HORSES

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"THE KING'S ENGLISH", "A DICTIONARY OF  
MODERN ENGLISH USAGE", &c.

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## PREFACE

IT will hardly escape notice that the author, though his name is on the title-page, appears to regard himself as nameless, since he not merely dwells from time to time on the joys of anonymity, but exhibits himself in ludicrous or unseemly postures such as surely no self-respecting person would assume except under an effective disguise.

Well, the 'Egomet' who published *Si Mihi*—! anonymously twenty-two years ago was a sensitive young thing of under fifty, whom nothing would have induced to give himself so freely away under his own name. The married senior of over seventy who now republishes it declines responsibility for the views of the callow youth who was, & is not, he. But, having himself found them not without interest, he has thought that others too might read them with an indulgent smile.

H. W. F.



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## PROLOGUE

*Si mihi*——!<sup>1</sup> has been a common cry in all ages. Nothing new or original about mine except that I have filled a whole little book with it, put my wishes into a bottle, as it were, to be quit of them once for all. I should be glad indeed if I now had the whole of them safely corked up, instead of a small selection; but they are flitting bat-like things that appear for a moment, & then make off at a sharp angle into the murky *Ewigkeit*,<sup>2</sup> And indeed I have not hunted them with much persistency of search, for fear their bottle should have to be bigger than was convenient. I know not that more of prologue is needed; but if my title, & my name, & the few words I have now said, do not suffice to explain my purpose, let the rest be in the words of others; whether they quite agree with one another does not greatly matter; *haud minus inter se constant quam mecum*

EGOMET 3.

When in disgrace with fortune & men's eyes  
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,  
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,  
And look upon myself & curse my fate,  
Wishing me like to him with friends possessed,  
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,  
With what I most enjoy contented least . . .

SHAKSPERE.

<sup>1</sup> If I had——!

<sup>2</sup> Eternity.

<sup>3</sup> There is no greater discord among them than between me & myself.

IF WISHES WERE HORSES

When I view myself,  
Having before observed this man is great,  
Mighty, & feared; that loved, & highly favoured;  
A third thought wise & learned; a fourth rich,  
And therefore honoured; a fifth rarely featured;  
A sixth admired for his nuptial fortunes:  
When I see these, I say, & view myself,  
I wish the organs of my sight were cracked.

BEN JONSON.

For the wit & mind of man . . . if it work upon itself, as the spider worketh his web, then it is endless, & brings forth indeed cobwebs . . . of no substance or profit.—BACON.

The world that I regard is myself; it is the microcosm of my own frame that I cast my eyes on; for the other, I use it but like my globe, & turn it round sometimes for my recreation.—SIR T. BROWNE.

But what says Philautia? Who should she be?

*Phil.* Troth, the very same I am. Only I would wish myself a little more command & sovereignty; that all the court were subject to my absolute beck, & all things in it depending on my look.—BEN JONSON.

I protest, if I had no music in me, no courtship, that I were not a reveller & could dance, or had not those excellent qualities that give a man life & perfection, but a mere poor scholar as he is, I think I should make a desperate way with myself; whereas now,—would I might never breathe more, if I do know that creature in this kingdom with whom I would change.—BEN JONSON.

## PROLOGUE

La meilleure qualité que le ciel m'ait donnée, c'est celle de m'amuser de moi-même.<sup>1</sup>—B. CONSTANT.

Car-il avait l'esprit réfléchi et la faculté de s'observer soi-même. Et il se procurait ainsi un inépuisable sujet de surprise, d'ironie et de pitié.<sup>2</sup>—ANATOLE FRANCE.

Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions & opinions which you are looking forward to could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy & happiness to you?—And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered No.—J. S. MILL.

My first thought was, he lied in every word.

R. BROWNING.

Ἄπιθι οὖν καὶ λέγε, ὦ Χιρίδα, ἐψεῦσθαι μὲν, μὴ πάντα δέ.<sup>3</sup>  
LUCIAN.

<sup>1</sup> The best gift the Gods have given me is that of finding myself interesting.

<sup>2</sup> For he was given to introspection & self-analysis—a never failing source of surprise, irony, & compassion.

<sup>3</sup> Be off with you, then, Chenidas, & tell them it's all a pack of lies (with exceptions).



• *IF I HAD  
FRANKNESS*



## IF I HAD FRANKNESS

WHEN I was a small boy at school, there was an institution by which the house was required to assemble in a large room on Saturday nights, for the purpose of boxing. We stood round in a ring, & when the seniors had satisfied their own lust of combat, & shown us the way to do it, they put us on to perform for their entertainment. I was not at all fond of boxing—a defect in the boyish character to which thirty years after one can plead guilty without a blush—; but there is worse to come. It was an extremely rare thing for me to be put on, which was remarkable; for boxing was recognized to be especially good for the reluctant. My method of evasion was not to skulk out of sight in the back rows, but to take up a conspicuous position in front. Alas, those were early days to have found out by experience the efficacy of finesse & bluff; it almost persuades me to accept what on other grounds I have no leaning to, the doctrine of original sin, & suggests that if I had been bred up to the Foreign Office I should have been capable of illustrating the great principle of diplomacy, that the real use of truth lies in its being the most complete of all disguises.

It will be gathered from the fact of my making this confession that I have a liking for anonymous frankness on paper; while on the other hand the substance of the confession is enough to show—



unless the leopard has changed his spots, which I do not wish to imply—that personal frankness in everyday life has no such attractions; & the distinction is of some importance. For frankness in life is one thing, & in literature is another. It has been remarked by Lowell that the poet's greatest charm is 'the power of being franker than other men'; & his greatest charm is perhaps also his greatest delight; for what can be more delightful than self-revelation to a public of which none, if you are anonymous, & few, even if you are not, will recognize you? Nor is the delight confined to poets; every writer who can reach a public at all may have it, and that whether it is his heart & feelings, or only his mind & opinions, that he chooses to reveal. Now this literary sort of frankness I have; but it must be added that the two sorts differ, not only in being separable, so that you may have one without the other, but also in their nature. Having the literary sort, I do not shrink from putting down on paper what happens to be in my head; out it comes without shame; I can describe myself like Burton: 'a loose plain rude writer, *ficum voco ficum, et ligonem ligonem*<sup>1</sup>, & as free as loose; *idem calamo quod in mente*<sup>2</sup>; I call a spade a spade'. It all goes down (with a certain qualification to be presently added); but I do not say it is all true; I leave you to judge of that, according

<sup>1</sup> I call a fig a fig, & a hoe a hoe.

<sup>2</sup> The same with the pen as in the mind.

to the degree of your insight or of the trouble you may think it worth. In life, on the other hand, I do expect my statements to be taken for true; but I am timid about making them; I consider there what people expect of me, & make some effort to live up to my reputation, at the cost of my frankness. Here is an illustration: for a dozen years I carefully concealed from my friends that I was not a Christian. But I indignantly repudiate the imputation of hypocrisy. I was not aiming at any temporal advantages whatever; my motive was simply repulsion for the airs of intellectual superiority put on by an acquaintance who chose to label himself agnostic. Still, however far from hypocrisy, this conduct could not be described as frank; I should still maintain the same reserve if I lived in the same society; but on paper it is another matter; that is one of the privileges of anonymity; I am frank, I say, in literature.

Or rather, I mean to be frank; for here comes in that qualification already hinted at. It is not possible for any man, unless he is only recording concrete facts, to be really frank with a miscellaneous audience; he may intend to be understood as much as he will; but he speaks a dialect, & his dialect will be misinterpreted by all but a few who happen to speak the same; the brain has dialects as well as the tongue, & no man can speak the same as everyone else, because the equals of unequals are unequal. Goethe put the fact at its

strongest: 'I had long been aware' he says 'that no-one understands another; that no man attaches to the same words the same meaning as his neighbour; that the thing said, or read, excites different trains of thought in different persons'. That statement of our mental isolation is, if not literally, yet practically 'an exaggerated one; some minds do come at any rate fairly near one another in their interpretation; they talk the same dialect, as I said before, though no doubt with negligible peculiarities too.

Is Nature frank, now? she does not talk in a way that most of us can make much of. Is a playwright frank? we cannot tell whether he means what his characters mean. Is a preacher frank? he is generally saying not what he believes, but what he thinks will affect his average hearer as his own beliefs affect himself; he is translating into a different dialect as he goes along, and in the process making himself unintelligible to any speakers of his own native dialect who may be listening to him.

Which raises the question whether, in literature, the praise of frankness is due to a writer who uses his own dialect, or to one who adopts some other that he thinks to be more wide-spread. Take the case of the man who deals in irony & mystification: 'Why the devil' grumbles the plain reader 'cannot the fellow say what he means?'. Well, so he does, my dear sir, but in a language addressed to his own likes, not to the likes of you: He has to

choose between two audiences; if he said what he means in your way, those others would not understand nor even listen to him, because they would miss the fact that he is a man of humour, which is his one passport to their favourable consideration. It may be a crabbed dialect in reality, this that they like the trouble of making out; but difficulty has its compensations; it is better, if a thing is to impress your memory, to read it in Greek than English, poetry than prose, Browning than Longfellow, parable than precept, irony than matter of fact; the effort of making it out fixes it. That, perhaps, is why, being unable to speak two dialects at once, he chooses not yours but another; but you, not knowing Greek or irony, naturally find him obscure. To be sure, he might take a leaf from Lucian, & preface his farrago of lies with 'Here is my one true statement—that the facts now to be recounted are false'; but that is a way out of the difficulty that would pall if adopted very often.

And so, I think, I have sufficiently defined my position in regard to the literary frankness; I do not allow motives of policy to deter me from putting down anything I am inclined to say; but whether the facts I record are literally or not more than philosophically true, whether the views I express are serious or ironical, is for the reader to determine; I write in my own dialect, not having thought it worth while to learn others.

I do not deny, however, in calm & rational

moments, that frankness in life is of infinitely greater efficiency, whether for good or for bad, than frankness in literature. One attaches to one's poor little style or literary methods an importance that is quite subjective; they have no interest whatever (unless of course one were a good writer) for any human being except their owner; whereas hardly anyone is so isolated that it is a matter of complete indifference to everyone outside himself whether he is frank in life or not.

And here I must admit, indeed I have admitted, that I do not stand so well. When I am asked my opinion in conversation, I give, not it, oh dear no, but either what I can put more epigrammatically than it, in order to avoid dullness, or perhaps the first thing that comes into my head, in order not to reveal my want of formed opinions, or else something more decorous than it, or even, if I am in a responsible frame of mind, what I think it might be good for my hearer to hold as his opinion, irrespective of whether it is either true or mine; & I could add many other varieties, if it were worth while; let it suffice to say that I have not the virtue, if it is a virtue, of frankness.

'If it is a virtue'? Yes, it would be a step forward if that question could be resolved. If you put it direct to anyone, he will tell you that of course it is. And yet the wearing of your heart upon your sleeve is generally discredited; & the wise old world seems to have decided that we had better hold

our tongues on some subjects, & say things that we by no means think on others. But then again, is the world either wise or old? If it is, perhaps frankness is after all only a primitive & barbarian characteristic that may under certain circumstances have the charm of contrast, but would never work as a general principle of conduct. Well, it is often a help in judging of a thing to get it classed as barbarian or civilized; but in this case (apart from the fact that some people still admire the noble savage), it is not so easy even to do that. 'Civilized & barbarian' was once 'Greek & barbarian'; now one of the great & conscious *differentiae* of the Greek was that he, unlike the barbarian, attached no shame to nakedness; & who knows that we should not be worthily developing the Greek tradition if we were to transfer this feeling from the body to the mind, & declare that no man who shrank from exposing his inmost thoughts to the public gaze deserved the epithet of civilized? That, however, is pure speculation; & I may remark incidentally that my setting it down is an evidence of the literary frankness that I do claim; since my interest clearly demands that I should make out the other kind, which I do not claim, to be a vice rather than a virtue.

The criterion of civilized or barbarian fails us, then, at our need; let us try nationality instead. It is easier to draw the line between an Englishman & a foreigner than between civilized & un-

civilized ; & perhaps we can decide what are & what are not the characteristics of the Englishman ; & we may assume, without the perhaps, that any characteristic of the Englishman is a virtue, & anything not characteristic of him, well, not necessarily one, to put it moderately. Is frankness English, or un-English, then? Why, certainly English. John Bull is honest, hearty, frank ; who dares hint otherwise? none, surely, outside the pro-Boer, anti-patriotic, cosmopolitan fraternity that delights in the fouling of its own nest. Still, to avoid the appearance of dogmatism, which some foreigners say is one of John Bull's less amiable traits, we had better take an example ; & as they call us, & we have lately accepted the name at their hands, the nation of shopkeepers, where find the example better than in our shopkeeping? Is frankness the English shopkeeper's method? And no sooner is the question put than a travelled Briton tells you how he had to chaffer & cheapen in the shops of Florence & Rome, if he was to return from his late holiday with his cab-fare home in his pocket ; a cunning set, these Italians, who will get what they can out of you without a twinge of conscience ; what a relief to go into a London shop again, & know that your man means what he says when he names a price, prohibitive or not, & that you will not be drawn on by tempting reductions ! His principle is, This is worth so-and-so, & for that price, neither more nor less, you shall have it. Frankness & honesty

itself, surely? Why, so it would be, if his fixed price bore any relation to the cost of production; but, as it does not, the conclusion is not so certain. How shall we formulate the Italian's principle, on the other hand? This article (he would have you understand, though his politeness prevents his actually saying so) has not an absolute but a relative value, settled partly by the comparative eagerness on your part for it & on mine for money, & partly by our comparative skill in dissimulating that eagerness. The Italian principle, though it cannot be so concisely expressed, is truer to the instincts of human nature, & in that degree more really frank; only, in a prosperous country haggling is not worth while; there are other uses to be made of time; our system is better for us, not because we are more honest, but because we are richer.

No; these criteria are disappointing; they do not seem to settle the matter; perhaps the mistake is in going too short a way to work, and trying to get one plain answer to a question that is not one nor plain. Is frankness desirable? how answer that but by another question—*which* frankness? it is not a quality, but many qualities. I had the sense to divide into the frankness of literature & of life, but I ought to have had the sense to subdivide the latter into half a dozen or a dozen. There is first the kind that its owner calls frankness, & everyone else brutality or rudeness; that wants whipping merely.



There is the kind otherwise called cynicism: 'My principles, sir, in these things are to take as much as I can get, & to pay no more than I can help. These are every man's principles, whether they be the right principles or no. There, sir, is political economy in a nutshell'. So says Dr Folliott, a frank person in his way; and Dr Folliotts, if they observe some bounds, are useful members of society; they prick some bladders, & profitably surprise the rest of us.

There is the kind that scorns the decencies of sham modesty. Gibbon apologizing, or refusing to apologize, for autobiography, observes with regard to his predecessors in the art: 'That I am equal or superior to some of these, the effects of modesty or affectation cannot force me to dissemble'. And quite right too, if only you can be sure that your estimate of your own merits is impartial.

But that is a difficult matter; and the difficulty suggests my next kind; this is internal frankness, the value of which no-one will dispute; it is indeed the condition of all external frankness; you cannot speak your mind unless you know what it is; you must be frank with yourself before you can possibly be so with other people; & that is why what the world can recognize for frankness is so rare; very few people ever succeed in coming to terms with their own minds; I personally, for instance, am as far from knowing my mind as if three-quarters of

my leisure (which is synonymous with my time) were not devoted to finding it out. What complicates the thing is that the internal, besides being the condition of the external, is at the same time conditioned by it; you can never ascertain and judge the contents of your mind by merely contemplating it; you must put them into words and see what other people think about them before you even know what they look like; you can no more think frankly without speaking frankly than you can learn to swim without going into the water.

All that may be very well, and yet it need not follow that the didactic sort, which insists on expressing itself beyond the remotest possibility of mistake, is to be encouraged; that is at the very best too much of a good thing; no such bore as the man who *will* have you perfectly informed of his meaning; that is of very little moment; a vague general notion of it is ample; he is over-rating his own importance; he is also clearing up his own mind, no doubt; but there is a limit beyond which he cannot fairly expect us to play *corpus vile* in his self-improving experiments.

Then there is the kind that may be called the courage of your opinions. Half our reserve is due simply to exaggerated respect for what our interlocutor may think of us; we perhaps think extremely little of him; but that makes no difference; we are not the more willing on that account to give him a chance of thinking little of us. A very little insight

should be enough to cure that timidity; when we hedge & boggle & evade, we are only making ourselves uninteresting & contemptible in his eyes, if we could but know it—which is surely as bad as anything positive that he could conceive of us if we told him our mind straight out. But it does not follow from that again that to blurt out your first formless ideas is either virtuous or engaging.

Another kind is not far removed from stupidity; it would be sad to see wit disappear from the world, & if Congreve, who really ought to know something about wit, is to be trusted, 'a wit should no more be sincere than a woman constant; one argues a decay of parts, as the other of beauty'.

Another kind, which I will label sweet reasonableness, would be not less fatal to politics than the last to wit; it would never do to say what we think of our political opponents, except of course when they have just been so good as to die; 'Nous disons que le gouvernement Waldeck-Rousseau est composé d'idiots. Nous avons raison de le dire, nous aurions tort de le croire.' <sup>1</sup>

But what about an avoidance of frankness that is not exactly political, but yet is politic? It is most conspicuous in the sphere of religion. What proportion of those who nowadays uphold Christian

<sup>1</sup> We say the Waldeck-Rousseau Government is a set of idiots. We are right to say it, we should be wrong to think it.

dogma feel 'the burden, so heavy to one who aims at being a reformer in opinions, of thinking one doctrine true, and the contrary doctrine morally beneficial'? No one will accuse of frankness the patrons of a religion that is good just to keep their inferiors well behaved; well, perhaps they have wisely decided that this is one of the departments where frankness is out of place; or perhaps they are traitors to truth whose treason will be paid for one day; who can say, yet?

Two more varieties, and I have done. The first of them I possess, and used once to be proud of; I now know better, but cannot get rid of it; there is a negative frankness that consists in never saying more than you really mean in the way of appreciation. Theoretically it is very well, & so long as you are inexperienced it gives you a great glow of conscious rectitude to praise a friend or a book or a servant just so much as he deserves & no more. But you soon find that the coinage has been debased, & that the £1 you give supposing it to be worth 20/- only means 10/- to the recipient. It should be easy to mend matters by giving £2; but it is not; temperament is too strong for you. I dread to think of the injustices I should perpetrate if I were a reviewer of books; & I think I would rather go without servants (as I do) than incur the risk of having to write characters for them that should not at once destroy their chance of another place.

My last kind is, so far as I know, now non-existent ; but it is surely time it should be invented. In these days of chaotic creeds & shifting ethics there is such a need as there never was before for knowing what moral obligations a man will consider binding on him, & what he will deny the authority of. We never know where to have anyone under these conditions ; it would be a frankness worth all the other kinds put together if every man would issue a manifesto descriptive of his moral attitude & intentions ; he might write it out neatly & hang it to his front door as the rating-lists are exposed in the church porch. Roman historians tell us of a curious institution called the praetor's edict. Rome was well supplied, I believe, with laws ; but they were not all consistently operative ; & it was found convenient for the praetor at the beginning of his year's tenure to state in his edict which he was going to be strict & which to be lax about. A modern candidate's election address is a more familiar, though less exact parallel. This is a suggestion I seriously commend to those who are uneasy about the fate of morality, & think it in danger of decaying *pari passu* with religion.

So ends my analysis (an unscientific & defective one, I grant) of frankness. It has given a very mixed list, & the sigh with which I record that on the whole I am not frank is mixed too, between regret & relief. The chief consequence that I discern as likely to follow if I were suddenly to acquire frank-

IF I HAD FRANKNESS

ness is that I should also acquire the friends that I deserve, no better & no worse, instead of the some better & some worse whom I now possess; but whether they would also be the friends that I should like is another question.



*IF I HAD  
IMAGINATION*





## IF I HAD IMAGINATION

*Essendo carestia di belle donne, io mi servo di certa idea che mi viene alla mente.*<sup>1</sup>—RAPHAEL.

I AM a very plain man. Which need not be taken, as an equally ambiguous observation of Elia's was taken by his Scot, of 'personal pretensions'. So far as looks go, I am neither Hyperion nor satyr, but something between the two; that, however, is neither here nor there; I am a plain man in the ordinary sense; or rather, not quite in the ordinary sense; for that is a boastful one; the man who so labels himself is wont to glory in his deficiencies and to imply that we should do a good deal better if others were plain men too. I make no such implication; I do not profess, but confess; I would regretfully convey the fact that a primrose is to me as exclusively a yellow primrose as to *Peter Bell*. And so far as the primrose goes, I am content that it should be so; if it is less, in its character of flower & nothing more, to me than it was to Wordsworth, it is at any rate better to me than it is to a Primrose Leaguer. But again, life is not to me 'a dome of many-coloured glass'; & I wish it was; when I call myself a plain man, I have not the least intention of poohpoohing the poet to whom it was that; I envy him. And if I do not boast of my deficiencies,

<sup>1</sup> Fair ladies being to seek, I have recourse to a Form that presents itself to my mind.

neither do I invent them; *Antony*, it will be remembered (who is perhaps the best known example of the self-styled plain blunt man), did both; he laid claim to plainness that was not his, & he insinuated that it would have been better if other people had had it likewise. Now I *am* a plain man, & I am sorry for it; I should like to have an imagination, & I have not; but being of a cheerful temper I look round for consolation.

There is not very much, but there is some, in the reflection that after all I have overstated the case; most things are relative, & among them my lack of imagination; it is not true that I have absolutely none. That is not true of anything that claims the name of man—or of horse or dog, for that matter. One feels inclined to doubt whether a shellfish, say, has the faculty; but anything that has ever dreamed a dream—and we know that horses and dogs do so much—must be allowed an imagination. Well, I have occasional dreams, both sleeping and waking. Again, I recognize that certain tangles of lines on paper, or some assemblage of colour-splashes on canvas, unmeaning without the help of imagination, are for many purposes equivalent to solid bodies made up of quite other material than paper & oil & ink & pigment. Then too, in the course of a speech that I read the other day, Lord Rosebery said something about ‘cleaning the slate’; (laughter), interpolates *The Times* reporter; & his lordship proceeded: ‘Ah, everyone remembers a metaphor;

they do not remember the argument that accompanied it'; if I had been there, I should no doubt have been one of the contributors to *The Times's* bracket; oh yes, I have imagination enough to grasp a metaphor, if it is not too far-fetched. I can even rise to greater heights than that; I always produce a tear or two of respectable size in the course of reading the *Apology of Socrates*, which I do every five years or so; now, as I suspect Plato of having had an eye to philosophical rather than to historic truth in its composition, my tears may be said to flow from the imagination. And when I read a novel I am capable like most people of that hostile feeling towards the novelist that is the best compliment one can pay him, since it only comes when he has attained a certain degree of verisimilitude; I conceive the characters as realities, that is, & the author as a historian. I know (I say to myself) what this man or woman felt under these circumstances; but whether this fool of a novelist knows I greatly doubt; nay, I am not at all sure he has the honesty to record the facts, & not pervert them to suit his own mistaken theories. And a similar resentment sometimes possesses me against real historians. Taking a perhaps unreasonable partiality for some subordinate actor, say Lucullus in republican Rome, or Sir W. Paget in Elizabethan times, I grow very angry with Mommsen or Froude for not making these gentry as prominent as they should be. There again is imagination of a kind. But indeed it was

needless to beat about so long for proofs that the writer of this book is not absolutely destitute of imagination; does not the heading of every chapter in it begin with an 'if'? & if imagination is not the faculty that sets up hypotheses, what is?

But then this kind of imagination that I have claimed (or pleaded guilty to) is not the kind one is in danger of being puffed up by. Does a man pride himself on the possession of reason? No; he perhaps occasionally thanks Heaven that he has it, since otherwise he would not be a man; but he is not particularly concerned about his superiority to the beasts; the superiority he would like to have is over other men, which the mere possession of reason does not gratify him with. Not every man, though reason is part of the definition of man, is a reasonable man; not every man, though a man without imagination is unimaginable, is an imaginative man. And my stock of imagination does not disqualify me from heading my paper *If I had imagination*, and putting, if I choose, an optative mark of exclamation after it—though I have not yet decided whether I shall make that addition or not.

For one thing, it is a very long step from the passive imagination, which can merely persuade itself to accept what it knows to be imaginary, & consequently enjoy itself in a theatre or over a poem or novel, as often as it can hire a brighter intelligence to do the real work for it, to the active imagination, which can manufacture for itself or

other people. The setting down of the distinction reminds me that it is not so very long since I was unconscious of it, & supposed myself to be endowed with an imagination. I well remember the inward scorn with which I received the opinion of an old parson upon novels; he found himself unable to read them, it appeared, because of their unreality. Poor unimaginative creature, thought I; I thank God that I am not as this realist; I have an imagination. It had not occurred to me then that the use of fiction is not to feed the vigorous imagination, but to stimulate the torpid, or that those who can afford to neglect novels are just the people who can make better ones out of their own surroundings. I now live in hopes of some day attaining to my old parson's state of mind, though the step is long, as I said, for puny legs. I have just read *Robinson Crusoe*, alas, with much unregenerate pleasure; but I hope to amend; I certainly read less poetry and more prose year by year; if I can follow this up in due course with more treatises & fewer novels, & that with more life and less literature, I shall begin to reckon with confidence upon dying an imaginative man.

That, however, is for a distant future. Meanwhile all the imagination I can find in myself—with an exception to which we shall come presently—is the passive. It is hardly worth so fine a name; call it rather docility; I can command myself into it when I see reason. I do see reason for accepting the facts

of *Don Quixote* or of *Hamlet*, because I believe that human nature will become more comprehensible in consequence. If I believed that the divine nature would become more comprehensible from accepting the facts of Christian theology, I could no doubt command myself into that also; but as I do not, my docility here fails me; the adoption of a whole philosophy or religion is too important a matter to play with. And here at least is some real consolation. One may rejoice, where religion is concerned, in the weakness of one's imagination; if it is not powerful & obstinate, then, as soon as reason seems to indicate that the religion you have been taught is not true, poof, you blow the teachings away; you do not waste time bitterly recalling all it has done for you, sorrowfully picturing the change its disappearance will make, & contriving compromises that will allow of its partial retention, but let it go down the wind. It is after all a great thing to have the passive imagination in an obedient state, & set it to work only for good cause. 'We shall tolerate flying horses, black swans, hydras, centaurs, harpies, satyrs, for these are monstrosities, rarities, or else poetical fancies, whose shadowed moralities requite their substantial falsities.' But we shall not tolerate schemes of theology equally fanciful, whose shadowed moralities begin to infect solid morality with the doubts now attaching to themselves.

So much for the passive imagination. To the

active I am almost a stranger; but I must in honesty give the pitiful exception that I have alluded to. I exercise it only in a way of which no man would be proud. I often construct, that is, imaginary letters or conversations, to be put on paper or into words when certain contingencies are realized; they illustrate my own magnanimity, wit, or other desirable qualities; but as the contingencies usually depend on my being more important in the world than I really am, the letters or conversations seldom reach actual existence. Similarly, when I was a candidate for the *Times* Competition, I arranged exactly what I was to do with the £1000; it was all to go in good works of a peculiarly noble kind. When only a much smaller sum fell to my share, it was obviously not enough to be heroic with; it just gave me a lift towards publishing a book that no-one in the trade would take the risk of. Such is the only way in which I can persuade the active imagination to operate; it refuses to contemplate any drama in which I am not myself protagonist. The limitation is perhaps not an uncommon one; I do not flatter myself that I am singular, even in so unenviable a singularity. If I might speak for those who share it with me, I would beg the world to believe that we are extremely interesting to ourselves, which compensates us to some extent for the consciousness that we are extremely uninteresting to everyone else.

Not long ago, about the time when I began to



have the same sort of curiosity about the active imagination as a man born blind, or say nearly blind, may have aroused in him by the constant references he hears to mysterious possibilities of sight, I was reading a book of Leslie Stephen's. In one of the essays composing it came a casual reference to 'the old story'—new to me, though—of a mountaineer who clung for hours with his hands to a ledge, believing in the darkness that to let go was to fall a thousand feet. When he could hold no longer, he fell—six inches—to firm ground. Now, thought I, if I had an imagination, I should stop here, and spend the rest of the day working out his emotions at the top & at the bottom of a descent that meant so much more to him than to his aneroid; whereas, imaginative pauper that I am, I pause only long enough to reflect, How pleased he must have been—rather humiliated, though, too—, & go on to finish the essay. Sure enough, when I have finished it, I find another entitled *A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps*. Leslie Stephen had an imagination, & had spent the rest of his day as I should have liked to spend mine if I had been capable of it. Well, well, the wise bards, & doubtless the humbler prose imaginers in their degree, have to pay for the vision & the faculty divine, if all tales are true.

Such a price  
The Gods exact for song—  
To become what we sing.

That is another crumb of comfort for the unimagi-  
native, which he picks up & makes the most  
of; he can at least remain in placid occupation of  
his own personality; there is no 'high-ranging  
spaniel', as Dryden figures the restless faculty, to  
drag him abroad with its excursive enthusiasms;  
he can enjoy his domesticity. He misses some  
raptures, but also some revulsions; if he may not  
taste the honey of the ideal, neither need his gorge  
rise when the insipid real is all that is within reach.  
He misses some entertainment, cannot boast with  
Sterne—'Buttonholes!—there is something lively in  
the idea of them— & trust me, when I get amongst 'em  
I'll make merry work with my buttonholes'; still, if  
he misses the quaint he escapes the lewd imaginings  
that together make up the fabric called Shandyism.

But I am surely an unconscionable time getting  
to business. Three quarters of the paper that I have  
allowed myself for this subject full, & not a hint  
yet of what might be expected if I had an imagi-  
nation. Well, that may be remarkable, but at any  
rate it is not wonderful. How should a person who  
has no imagination imagine what would happen if  
he had one? It is in the nature of things that he  
should be able to sigh, but not to formulate what  
he sighs for, to write down the protasis of his con-  
ditional, but be at a loss for its apodosis, open an  
account, & have to close it with the melancholy  
legend, 'no effects'. I must not quite let it come to  
that; ~~no~~ well tear up my paper at once; I must

remember that I am not stoneblind, only high-gravel blind, & make a blear-eyed guess or two.

What, then, if I had an imagination? Why, to begin with, I should not be writing this foolish little essay, nor any of the few hundred similar ones I have prepared for an irresponsible public in the last five years. No; I should be a novelist, a great one, or a popular one, or both. As it is, I no sooner sit down to write a novel than I bethink me of the necessity, commonplace but pressing, for a plot & some characters. As to a plot, the construction of it seems to me nothing short of magic; & for characters, there is indeed one that I am intensely concerned with, but it is not susceptible of infinite subdivision. These are my only difficulties; give me an imagination worth the name, & you shall soon see whether the roll of immortals shall not receive an addition.

That is the literary metamorphosis to be looked for—a highly desirable one. The moral change is of another sort—how I should lie, to be sure!—a habit that has been forbidden to me almost as much as novel-writing by my poverty of invention. For I have no principles to restrain me; in the rare cases when a lie presents itself, I decide whether to use it or not according as I estimate the balance of good & evil likely to result from that particular lie; but they do present themselves so seldom that the amount of truth I now tell is out of all proportion to the falsenood. Perhaps it would be a pity

that that proportion should be reversed by my acquiring imagination; I do not know. Of course there is the possibility also that the thing might work both ways. Perhaps I am only willing (when able) to lie because, being unimaginative, I do not realize the many distant as well as the few immediate effects of it; perhaps a man who has no imagination has no principles for that reason; perhaps the imagination that enabled me to lie would also convince me of the undesirability of lying; again, I do not know.

I foresee that when this revolution does come about, I shall be vastly more charitable than I am now, in both senses. As to judgement, my present course is the natural one of not seeing what anyone else should want with a failing that has no attractions for me. Having no fondness for spirituous liquors myself, except to quench thirst (when I am not such a fool as to prefer water), I really do not understand how anyone can take to drink. I cannot put myself in other people's places; at the same time I have the greatest respect for those who can, and often put force upon myself to accept their judgements instead of my own. When my imagination arrives, I shall perhaps be able to do it for myself. How soft-hearted I shall be! Well, I think I shall like that; let it arrive.

In the other sense of charity, though, the outlook is rather serious. I feel sure I shall be selling all my goods & giving to the poor. I do not do that

now; my sense of their miseries is very comfortably dim; to do myself justice, I never see, in the corner of the world in which I live, what strikes me as a poor man; but when I acquire a shuddering appreciation of other people's hardships, I shall certainly be selling my goods. Well, it is surely better that I should not; there is so little of them. I will not trouble the reader with an exact estimate; but if I did I believe it would surprise him; there is enough for me to feel the loss of, but not enough for anyone else to feel the gain of. On the whole, I am content to be unimaginative in that direction. Of course, though (these things are so complicated and problematical), my imagination is also to make me a popular novelist, & consequently a rich man. That considered, it becomes a question whether it is better that I should rob a million readers and help a thousand paupers, or do without readers and pensioners alike. Once more, I do not know.

Altogether, a sadly inconclusive result. I never dreamed, when I wrote that pretty motto under my heading, that I should end so lamely. It really seems that there is no call for the mark of exclamation I doubted about. Is there only six inches, & not a thousand feet, as I fancied, between having & not having an imagination? Well, it makes for content to suppose so, any way. I am ashamed of myself, all the same, for my meanness, which after all I do not believe I should be guilty of, if I had an imagination.

*IF I HAD  
OPINIONS*



## IF I HAD OPINIONS

I SHALL have, I find, to trouble the reader with my view of what it is to have opinions, & with a more wearisome exposition of how, & how far, & in what inconsistent ways, I myself fall short of this desirable state. For it is hardly permitted to anyone, & least of all to a mediocrity like me, to have no opinions at all. Even a mediocrity, however, will probably in the course of his life come across a person or two whom he must enviously recognize as real owners of opinions, in comparison with whose perfections in this respect his own equipment may be fairly described as a negative quantity.

I too am honoured with the acquaintance of more than one such paragon. I love & seek their company as far as modesty will allow; for, if I envy them, it is with no ill feeling; & if I abstain from thrusting myself frequently upon them, it is because I feel how distressing my vague and flabby personality must be to their clear incisive intelligences; I always think that there can be few more unpleasant tasks than that of the doctor who takes permanent charge of a patient with some chronic mental weakness; but he at least has his *quid pro quo*, whereas my friends with opinions tolerate me out of pure charity; so I feel myself bound in honour to sponge on them as little as may be. I hope they give me credit for this forbearance; they would if



they knew the yearning gratification with which I listen when I have raised a subject in their presence, & they reel off a systematic lecture upon it that shows they have previously considered it in all its bearings. That exhausted, I try another, & the same astonishing thing happens. All those pleasant spare moments, I am forced to conclude, that we others give to vacancy or to enjoyment after our kind, they have devoted to forming opinions and getting their thoughts neatly tabulated; or rather, their best enjoyment is just to be sure they know what they think, & can put their hands at a moment's notice on the set of opinions that belongs to any subject in earth or heaven.

I confess that, when I am away from the glamour of these performances, I relapse into an unregenerate liking for some doubt about my own opinions. It is, after all, the uncertainties of life that make it worth living, & uncertainty whether one will be a Christian or a Buddhist this day next month, whether one really is, as one supposed, a convinced free-trader, whether Mr John Morley or Mr Hall Caine is according to our notions more worthy of a place in the British Academy—each of these is an uncertainty that contributes as truly, though in a lower degree, to alleviating the monotony of life as those of a more objective nature which depend on things outside our own brain:—How will those tickets in the German lottery turn out? Shall I

make my century in *Gentlemen v. Players*? Will the reviewers have a good word for me this time?

Nevertheless, I recognize that, though there have been schools of philosophy that made suspense of judgement their central precept, my private liking for it is very far from philosophic, no better than a specious excuse for my want of the opinions that it is a disgrace to be without. In Miss Austen's day, I have gathered, the important question about every man was whether he had principles. It is a question that no-one would dream of asking now; perhaps everybody has them; perhaps nobody has them; I cannot pretend to say; at any rate they are not in request; for all one can tell, it does not matter whether they exist or not. Opinions, on the other hand, are very necessary; the possession of them is a passport into society, & they have two advantages over the discarded principles: the first is that they are much more useful for social purposes, affording the excellent basis that they do for agreement or (what adds at least as much to the amenities of intercourse) disagreement; & the second is that they are so very much easier to *viser*; the more principles a man had, the less he used to talk of them; a long & patient observation of his conduct was the only way of ascertaining whether he had them; but there is no such shyness about opinions; most of those who are fortunate enough to have, are quite willing to air them—the more that, in view of their chief uses, it really does not

much matter whether they are wrong or right; what does matter is that they should exist.

That matters so much that most people make some pretence of having them, even if they have not; I do a little in this way myself; but it is a forlorn expedient; one may occasionally deceive others with it, but to deceive oneself is very difficult, beyond my poor powers, at any rate; whence it comes that there is nothing I hate more than being asked what I think on a debated subject; the deference implied by the question is quite outweighed by embarrassment concerning the answer. When I say that I have no opinions, I mean of course opinions of my own, & permanent ones; I have generally a large temporary stock of other people's, which I borrowed yesterday, shall return, or rather throw away, tomorrow (for the lenders will by that time have no further use for them), and am free to employ today as I will; but such employment is at best half-hearted.

My system of borrowing is itself rather peculiar; a certain cross-grained tendency inclines me to be always in opposition; my friend A being a free-trader, my opinions in his presence are strongly protectionist; only they are not *my* opinions, but those of my other friend the fiscal reformer B, against whom I was upholding free trade the other day. I would not have it understood that this is a sociable device of mine, adopted for the good of the argument; no; B's views are genuinely mine

in A's company; I believe in them *pro hac vice*. It is only later meditation that reveals my methods to me, assisted, indeed, by an experience that constantly befalls me in converse with another friend who is cursed with too good a memory. He is always challenging me with one of my long past utterances, entirely inconsistent with my present contention. For a long time, I used to receive these citations with an angry incredulity; it was manifestly impossible that such an opinion could ever have been mine; but the cumulative evidence at last put me upon a self-examination, which showed me my sad mental condition.

Such is the genesis & nature of perhaps half my opinions, that half which represents me in public; it is obvious that, though they may be fairly called opinions, the adjective 'my' is not legitimate. With the other half, which I keep to myself, the position is reversed; they belong to me, but they have no real right to be described as opinions; for I can give no reasonable account of them. Sir Thomas Browne was not content with being one philosopher; he was two:—'I have therefore one common & authentic philosophy I learned in the schools, whereby I discourse & satisfy the reason of other men; another more reserved & drawn from experience, whereby I content mine own'. So with me; what I really believe, I do not consider it necessary to establish by logical process; things settle themselves in my mind, I do not settle

them; & the result is instincts, not reasoned opinions. I sometimes call my patriotism in to still any momentary misgivings on the point, & tell myself with pride that I am an Englishman, & not a German; how truly said Goethe, *Denn er war am Ende doch ein Deutscher, und diese Nation giebt sich gern Rechenschaft von dem was sie thut*<sup>1</sup>! It is surely permissible for one of a nobler & greater nation to let his opinions (for in those full-blooded moments I do not hesitate to give them the name I just now abjured)—to let them develop as they will, unrestrained by cramping words & syllogisms. But of course prudence dictates that such products as these should be kept for home consumption; I religiously conceal them, lest they be taken from me; for I am conscious that I cannot do them justice or maintain them in argument.

I may seem now to have disposed of all my opinions, one half of them as not mine, the other as not opinions. And so I have, in a rough & ready fashion; I dare say the reader would be willing to rest there; but I cannot let him off so easily as that; my mind is not quite the *tabula rasa* that this account of it would imply; a few qualifications and additional touches are necessary to give a fair picture of it.

It has already been implied that; if there are no opinions worthy of the name, there are some of

<sup>1</sup> For he was after all a German, & Germans are given to reasoning out their actions.

what other people might call prejudices, but I should prefer to call intuitions. According to the stern & unfeeling Mill, 'the notion that truths external to the mind may be known by intuition or consciousness . . . is . . . the great intellectual support of false doctrine & bad institutions'. But we all know that he was an hard man; I have good enough company, I consider, in clinging to my prejudices; there are plenty of people who know their prejudices to be prejudices, but retain & are proud of them, perhaps because prejudices shared with the respectable are respectable, perhaps as a mark of individuality. I do not go as far as they; I make no display of mine; but I confess I cling to them in secret; I must; I should not know myself without them; to expunge them would be equivalent to annihilation. Again, this *tabula* of mine which corresponds to that on which persons of real intelligence engrave permanent opinions, while on the one hand it is roughened & blurred with prejudices, is on the other as sensitive as a photographic film, & generally seems to hold an opinion, recently impressed; which, however, soon fades. Just as I so intensely enjoy some kinds of reading that while fresh from it I feel that I must be able to produce the same kind of stuff myself—fatal conviction!—& often essay it with disastrous results, so I love to hear a clear-cut opinion logically maintained, & go about exhibiting my imitation of it, till in a day or two its fresh-

ness is lost & a substitute must be found. I am seldom cynical or presumptuous enough to suppose that I am no worse than my neighbours in this respect; it may flash across me in some jaundiced moment, while X is discoursing with his usual versatile originality, that perhaps he only differs in borrowing with discretion & never showing his booty where it will be recognized; but I soon grow humble & respectful again.

Another characteristic of my opinions is that the negative are out of all proportion to the positive; I am often clear that everyone else is wrong, without any certainty that I am right—& indeed without having an alternative of my own about which to be certain whether it is right or wrong.

As all that portion of my time which remains over from writing is devoted to reading, it might fairly be expected that on literature at any rate I should have some real opinions. Well, if grammar is part of literature, I have; consult me on a grammatical point, & you give me the rare felicity of being able to say with confidence, if not with correctness, This is legitimate & that is not, & of adding the reason for my faith. But take me beyond grammar, & I am disconsolate again. I never say of a book, This is good, & for this reason, That is bad for the other; the nearest I come to an opinion is, This I like, & that wearies me. Nay, even my literary likings are often second-hand; I can work myself under a critic's guidance into

factitious admiration for literature that I am not capable of grappling with for myself—just as a stray kindly comment on an acquaintance whose merits I have never found unaided will suddenly revolutionize my conception of him. The able & entertaining gentlemen who write introductions to new editions of great authors produce here & there an anecdote I know or a judgement I can endorse, & I find myself in an atmosphere of appreciation that I can take for my own.

When it occurs to me to arraign myself for my lamentably unprovided state, & to enquire how it has come about, I trace it back to laziness. For instance, I cannot be at the pains to make my practical opinions consistent, & so long as they are inconsistent they hardly are opinions; they are only the materials out of which opinions might be, with some trouble, evolved. I have what I think a healthy dislike for artificial flowers & made-up ties; how is it, then, that I have covered my floor with a linoleum that is nothing but an imitation of wooden parqueting—& so colourable an imitation that visitors have distressed me by taking it for the real thing? because I lack the energy to make my inchoate opinions effective. How is it that a question on an unfamiliar subject always finds me unprepared with a view? because I live from hand to mouth, and make all decisions when I must, not when I might. There may be something to be said for it; it perhaps makes life less formal,



less cut & dried; the man who buys a suit of clothes when he wants it, wears it out, and then gets another, has some advantages of simplicity & economy over the owner of a vast wardrobe that never needs renewing, & always supplies the exact thing for the day's wants ready to hand. All that is flattering unction, good enough on occasion; but the real explanation is laziness. And, to tell the truth, I am always well satisfied when I have brought my foibles back to that source; my parents, or my Creator, or the chain of causes that have been at work between the appearance of protoplasm & the appearance of me, have not imparted to me a sufficient amount of energy to make me a man of opinions; who shall blame me for that? I shall at any rate not blame myself.

Well, the man whose vital force is not equal to formulating opinions can save himself trouble in three main ways, all of which I practise. He can make temporary use of other people's & come off in society with fair credit; he can avoid embarrassment by shunning society; & he can, when society has trapped him, and he has neither his own nor other people's opinions to make play with, at least shake his head with oracular taciturnity, & refuse to display his own emptiness by taking up too docile & enquiring an attitude. I have a profound sympathy for Mrs. Shandy:—'It was a consuming vexation to my father that my mother never asked the meaning of a thing she did not

understand'. I never do, either; there is plenty of time between now & the day of judgement; I shall doubtless pick up the missing information accidentally in the interim, without pandering to the didactic tendencies of the present company.

And now I think I have set forth as well as I can my present indigence, & may proceed to speculate on the happiness that will follow when my ship comes home, deep laden with the riches of the mind.

The effects, so far as I can foresee them, will not be wholly good, but the good will preponderate; let me clear the evil out of the way first.

To begin with, I shall have to resign all thoughts of that legitimate object of an Englishman's ambition, the writing of M.P. after his name; a modern member of Parliament is the mouthpiece of his caucus's opinions; he must not have any of his own. But for one fact, this would be a very serious consideration with me; indeed, pending the actual arrival of my opinions, I do not feel capable of deciding whether I would rather be an M.P. without opinions, or a letterless private person with them. But the one fact that makes this penalty practically negligible for me is that he who would be an M.P. must have, besides no opinions, a modest £500 a year to support his dignity upon. Which not having, I need not hesitate to incur the other disqualification as well.

Next, I cannot disguise from myself that I shall

be an intolerable bore. Not that all people with opinions are that; it need only happen if they also have the didactic impulse strongly developed; now I have; it is under present circumstances kept fairly in check by my consciousness of having no opinions worth instilling into anyone but children or imbeciles. I shudder to think what I should be if that check were removed. Still, as I should not shudder then, but only make others shudder (for what bore knows his own quality?), too much need not be made of this objection.

Connected, & more formidable perhaps, is the change that will take place in the sort of company that I frequent. I now, as I said before, attach myself as much as my conscience will allow to those who, being well equipped with opinions, are capable of teaching me. I shall then set up as an oracle to those who wish to learn; & I rather doubt whether their company will be as good for me.

Lastly, I am sadly afraid that I shall have to make up my mind, or indeed shall find it made up, once for all between religion & irreligion, instead of taking them as now alternately by daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly shifts. Many people regard this change as a blessing; but it has been sufficiently indicated in the previous part of this essay that one of my few, not opinions, but prejudices or intuitions, is in favour of whatever lends variety to life; unsettled views on religious belief are one of the greatest luxuries in this kind.

And now for the brighter side of the account. I shall no longer be under the necessity of reading the newspapers of both parties—my obvious duty as things now are—; I shall not even need to read my own party's interpretations of facts; I shall merely take the most impartial organ I can find, & gather from it nothing but what has happened in the last four and twenty hours: a great saving of valuable time, an exchange, say, of five minutes *per diem* for an hour or two.

I shall experience the ineffable tranquillity that I now wistfully fancy as the natural result of knowing your own mind.

I shall feel myself less *de trop* in society, for the memory will, I hope, abide with me that there is always sport to be had by others out of an opinionative man. And another bar to my sociability will be removed; for I shall no longer be timid about exhibiting my mental wares. As it is, they are so fragile that I dare not expose them for fear of breakage. You may think, reader, that I have been making a fairly clean breast of them for sixty pages. Ah, yes, one dares show them in a book, as one might put them in a glass case, where they will remain untouched; to hazard the poor things naked & unprotected among ravening tongues is quite another matter.

I shall be of some use in the world, which I cannot see that I am now. Indeed I am not at all sure that I shall not realize the ambition that has

IF WISHES WERE HORSES

always been baulked by my openness of mind,  
& grow into a journalist.

And, above all, my bachelorhood will come to an end; for the shipload of opinions would be a strangely ill-assorted one that did not include the means of deciding between those rival charms which have so long drawn me several different ways.  
*Quod felix faustumque sit!*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> May good come of it!

‘ *IF I HAD  
CHARITY*



## IF I HAD CHARITY

THERE are two kinds of charity; more, no doubt, if you are analytically inclined; but at any rate two, of which a particular person may have both in various degrees, or one, or neither; call them the charity of the purse, & the charity of the heart. The distinction may prove inconvenient & complicate matters in the piece of self-examination I have in hand; but at least it should secure me against any dearth of material. I am extremely defective in both, but perhaps not absolutely destitute of either.

One of the few cases (almost the only one I can recall) that have convinced me of the latter proposition is that of the black dog. 'The black dog' is all in the way of name that is vouchsafed to a poor mongrel allowed to bring itself up as best it could in our little settlement. There are several other dogs, of more distinguished ancestry, more gentlemanly manners, & more agreeable appearance. It must be confessed that the black dog, besides his unprepossessing looks, is both a coward & a bully; but I like to think that these vices are merely the outcome of his history, which has included many kicks & very few caresses. On my arrival in the settlement, which is much more recent than his, he concluded by induction that the number of his enemies was increased by one, & commenced hostilities experimentally; but, as the



treatment I saw dealt out to him in other quarters soon convinced me, he was only acting on the strategical maxim that the best defence is offence. He repelled my advances for some time, however; but he has now come to regard my cottage as a perennial source of mutton-chop bones & other dainties, & myself as the only human being whom he may jump upon or come within reach of with impunity. I am mistaken, or he is beginning to know what self-respect is; I should hardly be surprised if I were to find him some fine day fighting a dog of his own size.

Meditating in my self-centred way upon this, it occurred to me, & brought some gratification, that in a condition previous to the settlement, when I had seen daily a hundred human beings for one that I see now, I had always been rather drawn to the black dogs there too. I could not call to mind that I had so visibly mollified the lot or the character of any among them; but I had often wished that I could, & had even, if I did not deceive myself, made attempts, no doubt unavailing, in that direction. Cheer up, I said to myself; you are not then *wholly* devoid of charity, whether of the purse as represented by mutton bones, or of the heart, as uttered in words of comfort; you have traces in you of a maternal protective instinct, which indeed has sadly little effect in practice, but is not on that account to be left uninventoried when you are taking stock of your psychic assets.

## IF I HAD CHARITY

That is about all I can say for myself. The fact is that in the main, & putting aside those casual & generally inoperative impulses of pity that have been hinted at, I have a hard heart. I do not boast of it even to myself, nor thank God for it in the words of that unspeakable<sup>1</sup> Beatrice:

Io sòn fatta da Dio, sua mercè, tale  
Che la vostra miseria non mi tange,  
Nè fiamma d'esto incendio non m'assale.<sup>1</sup>

But I have it; it always inclines me to say: I ask neither help, sympathy, nor consideration from any man; why then should I give them? I do unto others only as I would they should do unto me; let them leave me alone, & I will leave them. Only, of course, they will not, all of them, take my advice, which indeed I cannot pretend, in my really candid moments, is altogether sincere. I may be genuinely willing to do without my friends' sympathy & my neighbours' consideration; but without my tradesmen's help I should surely find life a very difficult affair; I must take up agriculture & spinning, which would leave me no time to think & write. Anyhow, all three sets take no note of my tacit or expressed dismissal; they go on being kind to me. So, hard heart or soft heart, the thing cannot stop there, or farewell to self-respect; kindness must be, not necessarily returned, but at least

<sup>1</sup> God hath made me such, thanks be to Him, that your sufferings touch me not, nor flame of that burning scorcheth me.

passed on in some form or other, on penalty of conscious pauperism.

It need hardly be said that a charity thus inspired will be of a cold, impersonal kind. And it is only natural that, though I know nothing of political economy or evolution, I am impelled by temperament, if not by logic, to look at society in a dry scientific spirit, accepting the broad conclusions that I believe to be suggested by these branches of learning. I feel no repugnance to the view that men are, individually, of about as much importance as individual ants; if *laissez faire* will on the whole profit mankind, though with hardships in detail, let us adopt it; at the utmost let us confine ourselves within the bounds laid down by the Charity Organization Society; the charity of the quickset hedge, one might call that—which will protect you if once you can get inside it, but meanwhile do its utmost to keep you out; & there is a great deal to be said for the principle. Who & what are we, that we should repine at the notion of a struggle for existence, with survival for the fittest only? Similarly, I should have no objection whatever to a State scientific breeding-system, including exposure of obviously unfit infants. So I post a rare occasional cheque to a hospital, remarking to myself *à propos* of the figures as I write them down that my income is a small one. Which is quite true; but which also does not save me from the suspicion that people with smaller incomes than mine manage to spare

## IF I HAD CHARITY

a larger proportion for such purposes. But then out of that disquieting thought I soon, with the aid of a talent for generalization, evolve a comforting one: it is probably true, I tell myself, that the fractions of their income given away by most people vary inversely with its amount; so, as my income is small (*very* small, I call it at this stage), it is likely that I stand pretty well. And to avoid pedantic examination into the logic of this conclusion, I diverge into reflections upon the amount of money people will spend daily on the gratification of their own appetites. To me, now, a glass of beer is as good as one of the best vintage you can offer; it costs me 2*d.*; how can these others reconcile it to their conscience to be wasting a shilling where I spend a penny, when they might be doing good with the difference? It does not affect me that the water-drinker views my beer in the same light; I expect the line to be drawn at the reasonable place, that is, where I draw it.

Well, at any rate I do give occasionally of my superfluity; it is true that my superfluity has a tendency to become less daily, as I grow accustomed to it & find new things to do with it for me & mine; it will perhaps end by not being superfluity at all; but things have not quite come to that yet; I distribute what I reckon a fair proportion of my income, complacently for the most part. Dissatisfaction sometimes breaks in, & I moralize sarcastically: Our charity (it is always some alleviation

of your self-abasement to associate the human race with yourself as the object of your strictures)—*our* charity, I say, just amounts to a confession that we ought to be charitable, not to a fulfilment of the duty; it is itself our condemnation.

But that frame of mind comes seldom; &, now I think of it, there is not much real danger of those hospital cheques ever dwindling to the vanishing point; they render much too valuable a service for that. There is a passage in a favourite author of mine that I am accustomed to misapply rather shamelessly in this connexion:—‘He that giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord; there is more rhetoric in that one sentence than in a library of sermons; & indeed, if those sentences were understood by the reader with the same emphasis as they are delivered by the writer, we needed not those volumes of instructions, but might be honest by an epitome’. To be honest by an epitome—what a delightfully simple solution of all our moral difficulties! but I will be extraordinarily moderate; I will not pretend to complete honesty in all departments, but be content if I can be merely charitable by an epitome. Enough for me, if I can find in hospital cheques a short way with misgivings over my lack of charity. I am not always quite sure that my author’s epitome meant a short way of this kind; but sometimes I am, & as long as those sanguine moods are liable to recur, it is worth my while to write the occasional cheque.

In view of other moods, however, which do not so readily allow the charity of the purse to pass current for that of the heart, it is necessary to go on to the latter kind.

This is concerned partly with how we judge of other people, and partly with what we do to sweeten life for them. How do I judge of them? Well, I am not the very worst of the uncharitable—that is my highest possible claim; I do not assume beforehand that a man's motives will be bad; I do not impute knavery to people I do not know; I take it for granted, till I have reason to think otherwise, that the publisher to whom I offer this valuable book will deal fairly by me & not take advantage of my commercial guilelessness. But I confess I shall not be greatly surprised, with the experience I have (not of publishers, but of myself), if my opinion of him changes before we part. For I have awakened to the fact that I think better of man in the abstract than of any man in the concrete. I am no pessimist, but have an exalted idea of the worth of human nature; only I resent it when the individual does not come up to my idea; &, as he seldom does, the more I know of him the less I like him.

This does not seem quite the right mental attitude; but if your temperament inclines you to it, what are you to do? I try to get some light upon the difficulty out of the proverb that tells us charity begins at home; it seems expressly intended for the

correction of those who, like me, approve the distant & unknown; & condemn the near & known. But it is one of those cryptic sayings, like 'The exception proves the rule', which always puzzle me. Is it perhaps concerned solely with the other charity, that of the purse? & does it only tell us to tuck up our own children warm in bed before sending blankets to Timbuctoo? I should like to get something a little less obvious than that out of it; can it be telling me that I must have a comfortable confidence in my own morality before I can judge kindly of my neighbour's? Taken that way, I could extract some satisfaction out of it, with a little juggling; for I might infer that the root of uncharitableness is in the desire to feel that your neighbours are no better than yourself, & from that again that if you are modest, & have a poor opinion of yourself, you will almost necessarily be uncharitable; if that is true, one begins to see that the Scotch petition for a good opinion of ourselves, since it makes possible or easy a good opinion of others, had more justification than one supposed. I, however, not having a good opinion of myself (though I am far from denying that it may be quite as good as the facts warrant), & being therefore under the necessity of reducing the people I know to my own level if I am to hold up my head as straight as I could wish, find that my best safety against uncharitableness is to keep myself as far aloof as I can from my fellow-man. It is a course

that does not make me charitable, but allows me not to be uncharitable.

Thus modesty accounts for my avoidance of all who are my equals or superiors in morality. But with the usual mixture of motives to which poor humanity is liable, I avoid the rest of mankind, whom I take for my moral inferiors, from the opposite principle of conceit. For I am an eclectic in morals; I do not, like the humble, give myself up trustingly to one director; I pique myself on accepting the good & rejecting the bad, alike in Christian & in pagan ethics. Now anyone who believes in private judgement like that, naturally considering himself to be in possession of true wisdom, is not likely to refrain his spirit & keep it low. So I am not charitable, but censorious, as well where the facts justify it as where I am only seeking a salve for my own consciousness of inferiority. But as I am quite aware that criticism of other people's failings is derogatory to one's own dignity, I express my censure not by words but by deeds; my only resource is again to get out of the way.

The charity of the heart was said just now to have two tests, the way we judge of other people, & what we do to make their lives agreeable. But the first test gives in my case, as I have explained, merely negative results; I can hardly be said to have a way of judging them, since my only principle is to keep clear of them in order not to do so. And the intelligent reader will observe without my



assistance that if you keep clear of your kind it is hardly possible to make their lives agreeable, so that I can lay as little claim under the second test as under the first to charity. That is true, subject to the consideration that complete solitude is not attainable, even if one could choose & endure it. I do keep up personal relations with a very small circle, & as I have the sense to know that mutual criticism in a small circle is intolerable, a *modus vivendi* is easily arranged—thanks rather, on my side, to a cold heart & a sluggish temper that does not quickly take offence than to the sympathy & insight that should enable me to put myself in other people's places. And I have even a friend or two, absent or present, for whom I have more regard & admiration than I am able to give evidence of in my behaviour or my letters. But as for contributing to make anyone happier than he would be without me, why, my only conceivable pretence is a positively ludicrous one, & rests on nothing better than the writing of this & other books.

It is certain that I do not continue to write them with a view to my own profit, for I know too well by experience what any publisher will say to whom I offer them. He will say, if he is courteously inclined, that he recognizes the writer's wide reading & contemplative attitude, but turns the pages without the indefinable sense of the sting & stress in them that would succeed in compelling the attention of the general reader, & justify him as 'a business man

in undertaking the venture; & if he is not courteously inclined, he will say the same thing in words a good deal shorter. So I write them, & save up till I can persuade him to publish them without 'undertaking the venture'. And then I tell myself at cheerful times that here is my gratis contribution to the happiness of the world. But there is an unkind maxim, specially composed for the discouragement of such authors as myself, stating that 'the world will not pay for what it does not want'; the converse of it is probably not less true, that the world does not want what it will not pay for; & it is only when I can get this out of my mind that the felicity of self-appreciation will make me a rare visit.

To sum up, it appears, after I have exhausted my ingenuity in searching for pleas, that my case rests, positively, on the black dog, the hospital, & the books, & negatively on the avoidance of society. May I not fairly sigh this time, *If I had* charity? *miseremini mei, lectores!*<sup>1</sup> for I am in the worst of all possible cases; I am neither charitable nor uncharitable; I have neither the gentle satisfactions of the one class nor the fierce joys of the other; I am a contemptible neutral, fit for neither heaven nor hell, but only for that Dantesque limbo which holds

la setta de' cattivi  
A Dio spiacenti ed a' nemici sui<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Pity me, ye who read!

<sup>2</sup> The tribe of the men of naught, abhorred alike of God & of His enemies.

And the consequences, if my sigh were responded to? I should write no more books, send no more hospital cheques, practise no more hermitry; substitutes for charity like these would not then be needed; there would be three good effects. On the other hand I should certainly ruin myself; for when I really want a thing, I never count the cost; it is true that I am what most people would call a penurious liver; but that is only because I do not want things; if I wanted to buy other people's comfort, the cost would be high. Then I cannot help suspecting that life is a dull affair when you are all charitable, when you feel it your duty to associate with each other & yet refrain from spying out blemishes; you may perhaps solace yourselves to some extent with toy animosities, like puppies; but you want youthful spirits for that, whereas it is never too late for real ones; now I am well on in middle age. I should be able & willing to listen to bores, which I am not now. I should become an artist in flattery, whereas the furthest I ever go now by way of showing my friends I like them is just to tolerate their company. With Crabbe, I should cease to condemn.

The murmuring poor, who will not fast in peace. No more, with Montaigne, might I *m'offrir maigrement et fièrement à ceux à qui je suis*, because *il me semble qu'ils le doivent lire en mon cœur*<sup>1</sup>. No more

<sup>1</sup> Be cool & reserved with those who have my devotion, because methinks they should read it in my heart.

## IF I HAD CHARITY

should I contemplate humanity unmoved; with Vincent Bourne I should say, ‘

*Sunt res humane flebile ludibrium.*<sup>1</sup>

With Gibbon, ‘my purse would be always open, but often empty’. With Cowper, I should ‘need be a little touched with my company’s oddities myself, that I might know how to administer to theirs’. With Mirabell, I should ‘have sense enough to know that I ought to be most ashamed myself when I had put another out of countenance’. With Mill, I should ‘believe in the doctrine of necessity *quoad* the characters of others, & disbelieve it in regard to my own’.

Ah me, ah me, what a transformation, to be sure! Do I really wish I had charity? I should not know myself again, that is certain. Well, if some god likes to give me the giftie, he may, I suppose. Meanwhile, I thank goodness it is no matter for me to settle.

<sup>1</sup> Look at mankind, & weep or laugh.



*IF I HAD  
IDEAS*



## IF I HAD IDEAS

THEY tell us that in conversation there are three classes, or successively higher planes, according as it busies itself with things, with persons, or with ideas. One can form some conception of what that means, & virtuously resolve to qualify for the highest plane: when it comes to putting the resolve into execution, virtue (or can it have been vanity in virtue's likeness?) sometimes receives a severe check. I for my part, joining eagerly at the start in some highest-plane discussion, am soon mortified to find myself floundering out of my depth; I grow first silent, then inattentive; & presently, when the course of argument brings a reference, illustrative only, to mere persons or things, I surprise my company by waking up & starting at a tangent in pursuit of this lower matter for its own sake. They perhaps see how it is with me, & compassionately join in, that I may not be humiliated; or perhaps they are too intent upon their own game to let themselves be thrown out by my impertinent divagations, & gravely resume after a momentary consternation, leaving me to reflect upon their tacit rebuke. The second is in everyone's interests their better course; for though I shall then at once wish that I had bitten out my tongue before I spoke, & not have repentance deferred till reflection shows me later my own enormities, both they & I shall have the consolation that, in spite of my folly,



the conversation was not in fact ruined. The present point, however, is this: experiences of that sort have long ago revealed to me that, willingly as I would think otherwise, the highest conversation plane is not for me; when I find myself on it, I languish for the homely lower levels; I have no ideas.

But, for all these mortifications, the notion of happiness that I theoretically but obstinately cherish is just to be admitted as habitual listener while two or three of the people with ideas set them forth; I am not to be absolutely *persona muta*, but be allowed to contribute as much as I see fit, & not expected to contribute more. I call my cherishing of this ambition theoretical, because I know so well by this time that the practical obstacles are insuperable; the shame that overwhelms me as I realize too late the ineptitude of my own irrelevant excursions has been touched upon; & though experience might dispose of that difficulty by bringing the needful self-restraint, there remains another & a greater. It is easy for me to find persons more intelligent than myself, but not easy to find those who are more intelligent in exactly the right proportion; & if the difference between us is too great, there might as well or better be no difference at all. The man who is far above me must, if I am to suck advantage out of him, condescend & make things easy for me, & I thank goodness I am not sunk so low as to accept that sacrifice; a dull man with a taste for quick companions I may be; I am

not so dull but I know my dullness, & I can-*not* find it in *my* heart to bestow it all of their worships. No, the ideal being unattainable, I will abandon that scheme of life, and retire to my books; among them it may not be so hard to find those that are at the right distance above me; for the choice is greater, & their feelings & interests need not be consulted. This perhaps is why I live the life of a hermit; it is a life that brings me some content; yet it is but a second best; & I do count myself an unfortunate in this matter of ideas; I have none to call my own, yet I have the consciousness that such things exist, & the yearning to possess them. To have them, or not to know of them, those are the two enviable states; the mean is not always golden, it appears; how much happier to feel, when ideas are forced upon one, nothing else than scornful, intolerant, sceptical, to be sure that what one knows not is not knowledge, what one has not not worth having!

And perhaps, after all, a yearning for ideas is a silly foible, sprung merely of envy & odious comparisons, one that should not be cultivated but sternly repressed. If we could forget our relations to other people, & put away the question of superiority & inferiority, we might doubtless do well enough without them. Has every man, if he could but know it, as many as suffice to fill his little capacity to the brim? Most of us can by way of exception be happy lying a whole morning on a

cliff watching the ripples; it was only yesterday I sat in the sun for hours doing nothing in the world but look across a narrow strip of moist ploughland; a fire of weeds was rolling out silver smoke wreaths, which now curled & eddied above, obscuring the sun only to enhance its brightness as they cleared; now spread caressingly along the ground; now made a half transparent half opaque medium on which the sprays of the hedge could momentarily inscribe parallel lines of shadow. In those hours I may have had ideas, or I may not; how can I tell? I was neither aware that I had them nor that I wanted them. But that is a state of mind rarely attained. These little exhibitions themselves, however simple, are not to be had every day & everywhere—not with the requisite amount, that is, of novelty, rarity, or motion. To be sure, though there is not a weed heap ready for burning every sunny & breezy day, there are said to be infinite varieties observable in clouds & waves & shadows & colours & wind-swung trees; perhaps there are, for the delicately observant; but to some of us one cloud seems much like another; we soon exhaust clouds, or require at least a thunderstorm or superlative sunset to beguile us for a few minutes. Man in towns exhausts the variety that chance offers there still sooner; the delicate observer is, there again, well enough off; he can watch the crowds hurrying past day after day, & not lose interest; but the rest of us must have our theatres, our society, our

newspapers, events, & books—a perpetual flow of external motion not too little varied. Think only what life would be without the newspaper—or return in imagination to the time when it had hardly come into being:—‘With what a mixture of horror & commiseration do we now look back to that period of our history when a written letter came down once a week to the coffeehouse, where a proper person with a clear & strong voice was pitched upon to read it aloud to the company assembled upon the occasion! How earnestly did they listen! how greedily did they suck down every item of intelligence that fell within their reach! Happy the man that carried off but half a sentence! it was his employment for the rest of the evening to imagine what the other half might have been’. We have moved since then—in the direction of greater dependence on the external. Yet there are, as one recognizes with respectful envy in the humbler moods, plenty still who hardly depend on either the country shows or the town inventions, who find, or could find, endless entertainment in the thick-coming fancies of their own unaided brains. Why (I reproachfully ask Providence) am I not one of these? in my ideas there is no spontaneity; they are to be painfully cultivated & economically used.

‘I am not one of these—that is plain enough in all sane moments. At moments of conceit, indeed, it is otherwise; I tell myself that I am not as these publicans, who must have their festivities & spec-

tacles & pastimes, or perish of ennui; as for me (I boast), give me a room & a minimum of food & a bookshelf, & I am complete, independent. A most artificial independence, that, comparable to the kind imagined by a princess who wonders why the poor cannot manage on cake when there happens to be a scarcity of bread; for books are only a more skilful & elaborate cookery of the same raw material that is ordinarily served up in the shape of society & the rest; if you depend on books for your ideas, you are not less, but one degree more dependent than those who take their sustenance in the less sophisticated form. There is, however, the singularity that the more refined product is to be had at a much less cost in money, time, & trouble, than the simpler; even so a box of matches is now cheaper as well as easier to procure than flint, steel, & tinder; nevertheless, the user of matches depends more on external help than his remote ancestor, & must not boast of his independence. And I, because a bookshelf is almost my only need, am not to think that therefore I am the equal of an ancient Cynic; on the contrary, I am among the least detached members of an interdependent generation; I want stimulating as much as anybody, but my particular form of stimulant happens under present circumstances to be easily come by.

Meanwhile, what *is* an idea? Why, far be it from me to say what it is, when so many great men have shown us by their disagreements that there is

no certainty on the matter; I will only say what I mean by it. And that is, a framework into which the owner of it finds himself able to fit facts that before were isolated in his mind. It may be small or great; may hold two facts or a million, may be valueless, valuable, or even up to invaluable. Monotheism, original sin, gravitation, vortices, determinism, monism, heredity—these are all ideas, & some of them—though that is by no means essential to their being ideas—some of them perhaps true; & on any of these that is true it would be hard to put a high enough value; but my discovery (false or true) of Mrs. X's ruling passion, the plot of my next novel, the formula for my set of essays—these are of a value that, if it perplexes a valuer, does not perplex by its magnitude; nevertheless they too are ideas, & gratify at least the sense of creation or possession. The man with ideas is the man who cannot be content to let facts welter by the million in chaos, but has the impulse to get some of them at least marshalled in comprehensible order; if he is a Descartes, a Spinoza, a Comte, a Spencer, he insists on being lord of *all* he surveys, & must have the whole of chaos marshalled in various degrees of subordination under one idea; but even if he is of a much less imperial type, he has many joyful moments at which it seems to him that life is suddenly grown reasonable & intelligible; like the old man in the boat, he cries 'I'm afloat! I'm afloat!'; & however soon or often he is stranded,

he will be found afloat again before long in a new craft or in his old 'one new patched, sanguinely voyaging.

Nor from this point of view, that of the owner's happiness, that is, is it altogether necessary that discoveries should be new; what a happy man must Thoreau have been, if this description is faithful:— 'He thought everything a discovery of his own, from moonlight to the planting of acorns & nuts by squirtels. This is a defect in his character, but one of his chief charms as a writer. Everything grows fresh under his hand'! His chief charm of all to himself, no doubt, as well as one of his chief charms for readers. But indeed, if we come to that, 'Salomon saith, there is no new thing upon the earth; so that, as Plato had an imagination that all knowledge is remembrance, so Salomon giveth his sentence, All novelty is but oblivion'. And another wise man assures us that 'the main employment of authors in their collective capacity is to translate the thoughts of other ages into the language of their own'. But if there is no new *thing* under the sun (though they seem to be telling us now that we cannot rely with the old confidence upon the antiquity even of an atom), there are at least new combinations & applications of the old things in quite inexhaustible numbers; so that even for those who think ideas essential to happiness there seems no reason why this should cease to be a brave world. Moreover, besides the new combina-

tions (which for most of us are as invisible, if as indubitably existent, as the statue in the block of marble), there are also the old combinations that are new *to us*. These we may be lucky enough to rediscover independently for ourselves; & then they have, for us, all the value of the absolutely new; we shall sooner or later come across them in a book; but our distress at finding they are not new is compensated by the extra evidence that they are true. Or on the other hand we may find them printed not in the second but in the first place, & so be *mere* borrowers. I find it stated that anything thus come by is not an idea at all:—  
 ‘Notions may be imported by books from abroad; ideas must be grown by thought at home’; σοφὸς ὁ πολλὰ εἰδὼς φυᾷ<sup>1</sup>, says Pindar, & will not allow, he either, much value to the acquired. Well, it is true that other people’s ideas serve us more often than not as mere material for parrot talk & if it is not a contradiction in terms, parrot thought; but yet we do now & then, instead of simply borrowing, manage to convert them by a mysterious process into our own lawful property rather—just as sometimes what we have always been aware of as a truism becomes suddenly in the light of some experience an all-important truth. Such appropriations may increase our wealth, at any rate, though they naturally cannot gratify our vanity; so that there is some gain even when the process is con-

<sup>1</sup> Wise is he whose knowledge is of home growth.



scious; & there is still less to be said against it when it is unconscious; what oftenest happens is that a seed is sown unobserved; when it germinates in due season, we put it down to spontaneous generation, rejoice that we are capable of original ideas, & never think of asking, What book was it that I got that notion from?

But whether we class as ideas only the fully original, or admit also the unconscious & even the conscious borrowings, insisting only on assimilation & rejecting only parrot work, owners of ideas are a small & select class; Anatole France reckons of them, in his considerable provincial town, two only: *Ils étaient sur toutes choses d'un sentiment contraire; jamais deux hommes ne furent plus différents d'esprit et de caractère. Mais seuls dans la ville ils s'intéressaient aux idées générales. Cette sympathie les réunissait.*<sup>1</sup> This sort of property is the qualification for an aristocratic company indeed; this shibboleth one that it would surely be worth while to know the pronunciation of. And apart from that, what envy does one feel as one reads in Mr Morley of the inexhaustible fertility of a Diderot! Or again, 'I begin with writing the first sentence—and trusting to Almighty God for the second'; to have the power of first writing down that statement, & then producing a *Tristram Shandy* in accordance with it

<sup>1</sup> They were of opposite opinions upon all things. No two persons ever differed more than they in intellect & character. But they were the sole inhabitants to whom a general idea could appeal—a sufficient bond of union.

(& we need not inquire austere-ly into Sterne's veracity)—this is one of the pleasant results of having a flow of ideas. Are they not a better wealth than pounds, shillings, & pence? I for my part am about equally desitute of both wealths, & can be at least impartial between them; but judgement is difficult because we have so much more information about one than about the other. Perhaps after all to 'come into' a set of ideas would be as little satisfactory as coming into a fortune. In the disappointing nature of that inheritance we all believe; so many people have been first poor & then rich, & have assured us that the change brought no joy. About ideas there is no such clear evidence; Solomon indeed found wisdom disappointing; but then wisdom is not ideas. This at least may be said: the want of ideas is much more sorely felt than the want of money, if you are capable of feeling it at all; but luckily not so very many of us are; a huge majority is of opinion, first, that it is much less trouble to have one's thinking done for one—which is true—, & secondly, that therefore that method is the best—which is far from true. So at least it seems to me; there I am a Millite:—'Truth gains more even by the errors of one who, with due study & preparation, thinks for himself, than by the true opinions of those who only hold them because they do not suffer themselves to think'; but the gain to truth is nothing compared with the gain to individual felicity. What it feels like to

have large & luminous ideas is impossible for us poor gropers, who find our way mainly by borrowed light, to conceive; but the comfort with which we traverse here & there a little patch of ground lighted by some farthing rushlight under our own control provides some sort of standard for conjecture; what ecstasies of joy & pride suggest themselves to the imagination! Too exquisite & complete a radiance, however, might dispose us to mere Aristotelian contemplation, an ideal that no true twentieth-century Briton can regard with patience. Rather than that, let us be content with the occasional gleams of our laboriously manufactured rushlights.

*IF I HAD  
A RELIGION*



## IF I HAD A RELIGION

WHETHER I have one or not the reader will be able to decide, if he thinks it worth while, when he has finished this paper; possibly different readers may decide in different senses. I am not in any doubt myself, indeed, & could at once issue a categorical statement about it, if it would be accepted. But whereas in the middle ages a confession of scepticism would have had instant credence, & been rather eagerly laid hold of, it is now put severely to the question. I observe that churchmen, believers, Christians, or whatever style they prefer, have a way of saying about any opponent who is well behaved or amiable or virtuous that he is 'a practical Christian', or 'essentially a religious man'. It reminds one of the Englishman's method, often remarked upon with some bitterness by foreigners & colonials, of making himself agreeable to any alien that he particularly approves of: 'You ought to be English'; 'Do you know, I should have taken you for an Englishman'. That is extremely well meant, very amusing to the alien, & a piece of real though unsophisticated courtesy. The corresponding politeness of the Christian is not, or is likely not to be thought, so naïve. The notion of a man's being English without knowing it is a patent absurdity; that of his being a Christian without knowing it is not yet recognized as such; & if a presumption can be established that all virtues spring

unconsciously (since not consciously) from Christian principles, a real stroke will have been struck for Christianity; the unbeliever who is a credit to his unbelief is therefore indulgently assured that:—

Here you stand,  
Adore & worship when you know it not;  
Pious beyond the intention of your thought;  
Devout beyond the meaning of your will.

This treatment of him is of course especially easy & tempting if he happens to express with gracious pathos his regretful inability to believe. Mr Lecky writes:—‘The music of the village church, which sounds so harsh & commonplace to the worshipper within, sometimes fills with tears the eyes of the stranger who sits without, listening among the tombs’; it would be almost rude to abstain from telling a man that he is essentially religious, when he comes half way to meet you like that. It is perhaps quite needless for me to reject in advance such courtesies, since on the one hand I am not intending to come half way, & on the other my reader cannot know that I have any of the virtues that would make it worth while to claim me as ‘in the best sense religious’; still it is well to be on the safe side; one sees the treatment extended to such unlikely subjects.

Religion, however, means in different mouths things so different that I had better before going further explain what it means in mine: merely what most people understand by it, a belief, strong enough

to influence conduct in two things—the immortality of the soul, & a personal God. If it were insisted that I should take religion 'not in its commonest but in its widest sense, as morality touched with emotion, I could not profess the same indifference to it; for I am bound to say that the progress of humanity, which, the religious (in the common sense) assure us is nothing but a cold abstraction, sometimes stirs in me what in my ignorant way I am accustomed to consider emotion; but perhaps this is only the sign of a cold heart; to a polar bear any water not cold enough to be ice is no doubt agreeably warm; & in a torpid heart perhaps a mere abstraction may cause welcome agitation. My own explanation, indeed, is not that I am cold-hearted, but that I am reasonable; human progress strikes me as practical, & immortality as moonshine; in the latter I see no reason whatever to believe; & not having the self-pity that is expected of the polite sceptic, I have no disposition to believe in it either—any more than, for instance, in the barnacle goose. The history of that medieval creature (for it is believed to be now extinct) may be found in Max Müller<sup>1</sup> and elsewhere. Its peculiarity was to begin life as a shellfish growing by spontaneous generation on ships' timbers, & end it, mostly in Lent, as a bird; mostly in Lent, because the innocence of its fish nature combined with the savouriness of its bird nature made it a

<sup>1</sup> *Science of Language*, Vol. 2, lecture xii.



great comfort to all who would fast with the minimum of self-denial. Immortality also is a great comfort, & to almost all of those who believe in it; for, not to waste time on the obvious cases of people either virtuous or unfortunate, who have their reward or their compensation to look to, even the deliberate sinner who has in him a touch of sportsmanship, pride, or self-respect, must derive a certain satisfaction from it: as things are to be set straight hereafter, he can feel that he is well within his rights, & doing nothing that the rest of mankind can fairly complain of, in choosing the brief elusive joys of iniquity for his share & leaving the others for his victims. The double nature of the barnacle goose, however, is understood to be no longer maintained even in the strictest catholic circles; & I expect the double nature of life, mortal & immortal, to go the same way; not in my day, indeed, but some day, even virtuous people will realize as clearly as some of us do now that the mortal part is quite tolerable without the immortal appendix.

Most of those who read this paper will, I fear, be outraged by a levity that can lump together the barnacle goose and the immortality of the soul; they will perhaps go farther, & say that the question of religion should not be touched at all except in books devoted exclusively to it, which, again, no-one should presume to write unless he were either a qualified divine or a deeply read anti-

divine. Taking the latter & stronger contention first, & leaving the matter of levity for the present, I can only say that I am of the opinion of Solon: when there is a *στάσις*, a serious division in the commonwealth, it is the good citizen's business not to stand neuter, but to take a side; the best way to get a dispute finished is to make it clear as soon as may be where the preponderance of strength is; neutrals enough, when religion is the issue, there are sure to be; both the people who have, & the people who have not a religion are at the best very small minorities; the great majority acquiesce sincerely but passively at ordinary times in what they take to be the ordinary view; only now and then under special circumstances does it occur to them that there is either so much truth in it that it is worth taking account of, or so little that it is worth expressly rejecting; practically the two extreme sets are the only ones that count; & whoever belongs to either should hasten to publish the fact. And further, in this conflict as in all others there is work, important if humble, for the light-armed combatant; the hoplite in full panoply will not suffice by himself.

It is every man's duty, then, according to my view, as soon as he can arrive at a definite opinion either way, to take sides either with the religious or with the irreligious, & to seize whatever opportunity offers for declaring his choice. That already covers in part, though only in part, the question of

levity, which must be considered more at length. One may be charged with levity in this matter for two reasons: first for making up one's mind without sufficient examination, & secondly for declaring one's mind in a manner beneath the dignity of the subject. First, then, have I qualified myself for giving an opinion at all, by doing my utmost to master the arguments on both sides? Why, no; I have not; no man has, it seems to me, unless he has given up the whole of his time to the investigation. As for me, I have been a busy man for the greater part of my life; the most I can say is this: I incline to believe that the thought of religion (whether as a help, as a doubt, or as an aversion) has been more constantly present to me than to most of the people I have lived among. I was brought up in a clerical household, of which the habits were religious, but not strikingly religious, & the virtues satisfactory but not remarkable; that leaves one with an open mind; such virtues may be due to such religion, but their attainment does not seem inexplicable without it. At any rate I was quite ready to accept what seemed the prevailing view at home & at school, that religion is the source of virtue; & though I never had the religious emotion strongly developed, I certainly endeavoured as a schoolboy, with much more persistency than success, to utilize in support of morality what I could cultivate of it. Many people no doubt have that experience; & most of them, concluding whether rightly or wrongly

that one's conduct depends on something else than one's religion, are content to leave it there, & lose interest in the matter. I, however, became a schoolmaster; & the schoolmaster, until he has arrived at a Yes or a No that satisfies him, cannot like other people simply put the question aside as of no further interest; he wants to know whether religious emotion is to be considered, in his building operations, as Roman cement or as untempered mortar. Accordingly, I have never ceased to feel an active concern in the effects of religion on morals. Such concern finds employment in three ways: first in observing, with what penetration may be one's lot, the motives that seem to influence oneself and other people; secondly, in turning over the thing theoretically in one's own mind; & thirdly, in reading other people's theories. I cannot accuse myself of neglecting any of these. It is true that I am not an acute observer; it is true that I am not a profound thinker; it is true, & of the three truths the least possible for me to doubt, that, while any certainty about religion seems to me out of the question for anyone who cannot get what he thinks a sound metaphysical basis, the reading of metaphysics makes my head spin. But in spite of all these deficiencies, & the waverings that result from them, there is a persistent general movement in my mind, which I can observe from outside, however little I can account for it; it is away from religion; I can hardly pretend to an

opinion whether I am better or worse in morals than I was ten, twenty, or thirty years ago, though my impression is vaguely and usually optimistic; but there is no such doubt about my religious position; I can mark it off in decades clearly enough: thirty years ago I thought religious belief true; twenty years ago doubtful; ten years ago false; & now it is (for me, of course) merely absurd. Nor have I, at this present stage, any regrets over it; the change seems to me merely the slow process of emancipation, the gradual triumph of nature over mistaken tradition. Whether the triumph will be won at all, & whether it will come soon or late, is very much a matter of the individual temperament; the process has with me been very slow, but not reluctant; I read sympathetically the character drawn by Anatole France of *un esprit tranquillement indocile . . . une âme à qui le doute était tolérable et léger, et dont les pensées coulaient à l'irréligion par une pente naturelle*<sup>1</sup>. I say to myself, then: You cannot pretend to be exceptionally qualified for deciding the question between religion & no religion; you cannot speak with authority; but on the other hand you are nearly fifty years old; you have never been indifferent about it; you are up to the average in education & intelligence; if you cannot speak with authority, you

<sup>1</sup> An intellect that ignored authority . . . a soul that could endure doubt without repining, with thoughts that seemed to gravitate towards scepticism.

can contribute a human document. That is my answer to half the charge of levity.

The other half remains. It is granted me, suppose, that one may have & even express an opinion who is below the degree of a philosopher, a metaphysician, or a Doctor of Divinity. But he should do it in decorous words, & in a fitting context; it is at the lowest shocking bad form, if not to say what one thinks on this subject, at any rate to say it in a jocular tone—nay, even to say it in a serious tone, but between the same covers with anything that is said jocularly. Even for Gibbon, though he

shaped his weapon with an edge severe,

it can be pleaded that he was

Sapping a solemn creed with *solemn* sneer;

*he* did not forget his manners; you are no gentleman if you cannot treat other people's prejudices (to grant them prejudices) with politeness; to compare the beliefs in immortality & in barnacle geese, to put the Virgin & Christ on the level of Isis & Osiris, to hint that the institution of whipping-boys is equally admirable with the doctrine of vicarious suffering, is needlessly to hurt the feelings of estimable persons who should be treated with more consideration. Well, in the first place, the

sensitive can always skip when they see irreverence looming ahead; in the second place, it is not an observed fact that the religious have any great delicacy about hurting *our* feelings; & in the third place, the word 'needlessly' is questionable. It is fairly used only if one of two things is true: that religious belief makes no difference in a man's conduct & character; or that belief has now been abandoned by all but a few old fogeys. Neither of these is in the least likely to be accepted; but it may perhaps be urged instead that belief deserves to be dealt with at worst very gently because of a remarkable peculiarity it possesses: if it is true it does immense good, & if it is false it does no harm. Remarkable indeed! I confess to being of an optimistic temper, but that piece of optimism is always quite too much for me; it is *a priori* so unlikely to be true that the *onus probandi* clearly lies with those who maintain it; &, with all the heretic blood that has been shed to account for, they have their work cut out for them. In the meantime, I assume that a false religious belief does harm, that the Christian religious belief among others is false, that there are many people who still hold it, & therefore that it should be combated in all effectual & not dishonest ways. It remains to add that in certain phases of a struggle the most effectual ways are the least ceremonious. It is well not to treat your enemy with studied politeness; if you cannot allow yourself to laugh at his follies

as at any one else's, you give the impression of playing for a reconciliation; to treat him with a certain contemptuous levity,' this side of indecency, amounts to throwing away the scabbard, declares your confidence in your own cause, & may contribute sensibly to victory, or to a speedier victory. To look at it from another point of view, what most helps to spread a great change of belief among the majority is not the sight of philosophers (who know too much) convinced, nor of ignorant fanatics (who know too little) violently carried away, but that of ordinary educated people taking it as so much a matter of course that they no longer think themselves bound to treat the moribund superstition with respect.

Not, after all, that I am going to be very rude to religion, to call it, as some have called it, *l'infâme*, or to pretend to think it so maleficent as it thinks irreligion; the whole of my apology might suggest this; we all take our manners very seriously, & I have thought it due to myself to explain why religion should have been introduced at all in a book that is not meant to be characterized by solemnity. But let us be moderate; religion does not on the whole make morals, but morals religion; *les religions n'ont guère d'effet sur les mœurs, et elles sont ce que les mœurs les font*;<sup>1</sup> the French puts it too absolutely, but more truly than is generally supposed; though

<sup>1</sup> Religions influence morality but little; it on the contrary makes them what they are.



there are certain definite pieces of barbarity or arrogance of which religion bears the blame directly, it is easy to believe that, if religion had not been there, the same amount of these qualities would have been expended, but in other directions. The effect that religion does have upon morals is not direct, but is worked through the intellect; the perpetual necessity of squaring reasonable conduct with impracticable ideals, reasonable belief with incredible doctrines, warps the intellect; the perpetual reluctance to accept new facts that are or seem inconsistent with supposed higher verities retards it; & a warped & retarded intellect is neither sure in discerning the true end of action nor quick in discovering the true means to it. Religion is, on this view, no better than a drag on progress; at the same time, not attaching too much importance to isolated regrettable events, one may say also that it is not much worse than a drag, and therefore regard it with no more bitterness than a good Liberal feels towards the Tory party—a set of persons whose individual worthiness does not prevent their collective activity from being blame-worthy.

But I had better now return to my neglected heading; for instead of considering what would follow ‘if I had a religion’, I have rather—for reasons that have perhaps been made clear—been insisting that no man should have one. But moreover, my formula itself does not this time mean the same

## IF I HAD A RELIGION

as usual. The reader is aware that it may generally be read as a sigh & interpreted as an aspiration; my book is mostly a *catalogue-raisonné* of the things I wish the gods had given me. But this time it is no aspiration; I am not one of those who envy the religious their emotions, or put down their own shortcomings to their inability to believe; no, it is merely the protasis of a conditional sentence, to which I should greatly like to fill in the apodosis, if only I had more material. One quite definite, though also quite unimportant part of the apodosis I do happen for once to know: I should still be correcting Latin & Greek exercises for money, instead of writing English essays for love; for in practice it is still now & then a temporal disadvantage not to be a Christian. But beyond that little concrete fact I can hardly make a guess. If I were a better man than I am, I should certainly do & leave undone very different things from my present doings & leavings; that would be so if I were as good as some religious men that I know; but it would also be so if I were as good as some irreligious men that I know; whether the mere change of me, with my present faculties, to religious would be an improvement is quite problematic; I at least think not. What, after all, is my rule of life? neither more nor less, religious sir, than your own—the Golden Rule. It is a rule, to be sure, that I do not live up to; do you? As often as it occurs to me at the right moment, I fit my actions to it;

when it occurs, as it generally does, too late, I am more or less bitterly ashamed of myself. Where I differ from you is that I see no reason whatever for the coming of one from the dead or one from heaven to tell us the rule; it seems to me simply that the self-respecting man wishes the account between him & other people to show a credit balance on his side, & this without any supernatural machinery at all. This is a personal & subjective view; when anyone naturally disposed to it is confirmed by finding that utterances equivalent to the Golden Rule were reached independently of Christ, his temperament & his reason point the same way.

I had finished what I had to say; but perhaps complete honesty requires me to add a paragraph. Taking my luncheon bread & cheese at this point, accompanied as usual with some light reading, I found Curzon's *Monasteries* open before me at p. 186, & the first words I saw were: 'I have forborne in these pages to make any remarks on matters of religious faith, for I consider it highly improper for anyone to speak lightly on these subjects, although the religion of which they treat may be opposite to their own convictions of the truth'. I sat rebuked; Providence, clearly, giving me a piece of its mind; but on reflection I cannot help thinking that Providence & Mr Curzon are mistaken. Speaking lightly is so far from being highly improper that it is at certain stages, as I

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have argued, almost necessary. It should not be based, indeed, upon thinking lightly; of that I may have been guilty; but if so it is only because that unkind Providence itself has made me incapable of thinking weightily.



*IF I HAD*

*A SENSE OF BEAUTY*



## IF I HAD A SENSE OF BEAUTY

ON this 11th of December the wind here is in the north-east, but there is very little of it, & the sun is shining. My cottage faces south-west, & in the open porch of it I sit & have sat for some hours, with no clothes whatever beyond a cotton shirt & a pair of thin flannels, nor any need of more. The sky is blue, rather pale, but limpid; the country, spread out advantageously on the other side of a slight valley in front, is mostly of a green that is rather too full & heavy, & lacks freshness; but the brown purple of many leafless copses, helped out by the greyish-brown spots into which our native building-materials of granite & red tiles melt at a distance, gives variety enough to compensate. One remembers now, & then, to the disadvantage of the present, that in March or so the whole of this expanse will be picked out with tangled lines of blazing gold, the hedges, now little-seen low banks of duller green, being all of gorse; but except when one is foolish enough to subject December to odious comparisons, the background is quite satisfactory. And then immediately in front of my feet is a strip several yards wide of chrysanthemums, yellow, white, & brown. From my point of view the sun is shining not on, but through the blossoms, so that each is a little mass of coloured light rather than of lit-up colour; & to add to this living effect nearly every stem



is at this moment tenanted by a bird, which keeps it dancing with what at least looks very like pleasurable emotion; 'This is a spray the bird clung to, making it blossom with pleasure' each of them seems to be saying in dumb show; a flock on its migration, as I suppose, has decided to make its last encampment amid this blaze of colour, reminding it of the high midsummer pomps & promising to send it on its way with pleasant memories. For they are not 'faint as a climate-changing bird'; by no means, but lively enough to do a vast amount of bustling about, with some of the quarrelling that, on so tiny a scale, enlivens the scene without seriously detracting from its serenity; from which alone I deduce that they are at the beginning & not the end of their journey; for I neither know what birds winter with us, nor can guess what birds these may be.

Well, from this scene I confess to deriving a modicum of gratification, though I am personally acquainted with a great many people who would derive much more, if they had, as they have not, the opportunity of contemplating it. Nor is the consciousness of proprietorship an element in my pleasure; my territory ends before the chrysanthemums begin, & they are my neighbour's. But if this fact proves me to be not absolutely without a sense of beauty, a reflection connected with it shows as plainly how unimportant that sense is. I know as certainly as I know anything merely

hypothetical that, if this ground were mine, I should neither trouble to cultivate chrysanthemums on it myself, nor pay anyone else to do it for me. As I am not wanting in energy when I see my way to anything that I really do care about, the conclusion is obvious.

We have other gauds here too, pearls that Providence does not abstain from throwing this way just because there is at least one (if I may be allowed to spare my own feelings by a periphrasis)—at least one creature here lacking in sensibility. These pearls are sunsets. I will not (*ὄνος λυρίζων*)<sup>1</sup> attempt to call up their varieties, nor do any splashing on paper with wordy pigments; I will content myself with saying that north-west of me, in the quarter of summer setting, is the sea, with, well away from land, a line of rocks & a few stray pinnacles ready to play a part in any celestial conjuring that may be on hand, & help confound the distinction between islets of gold or amethyst & mere clouds. And south-west for the winter setting there is a long neighbouring ridge crowned with woods, & a windmill or two, & a toy church; this last is the very image of those that adorned the Christmas cards of forty years ago; there is a bald shaven spick-and-span completeness about it that is very distressing in broad daylight; but at 5.0 p.m. in December it does well. Connoisseurs in sunsets, then, will see that both quarters have their capa-

<sup>1</sup> An ass playing the lyre.

bilities; & I admit that I do not grudge to these displays a little time & attention; nay, I am sometimes wrought by them to quite the proper solemnity of regret over the transitoriness of things, which is, if I am not mistaken, the most constant effect of the more exquisite natural beauties. This sentiment, however, whether painful or pleasurable (& I have no hesitation whatever myself in classing it as the latter; it is a piece of activity on the part of 'this intellectual being' of ours), must be reckoned rather among the moral than among the aesthetic pains & pleasures. And similarly with the chrysanthemum scene, I do not think it is so much its beauty that affects me as a general impression of satisfactory completeness about it, of every detail's fitting in just as it should with every other. 'God's in His heaven'? I cannot say; he may be, or he may not; but at any rate 'all's right with the world', as far as I can discern from my today's survey of these few square miles of it.

I was not always in this humble frame of mind—if my reader credits me with humility—about the aesthetic faculties. I used to fancy myself endowed with an average share of them, & took a possibly innocent juvenile pride in their cultivation. I had weekly relays of flowers for many years to add to my bachelor room a grace that not every bachelor troubles himself about; that, it is true, was in my wealthy days; but if wealth were to return there would be no more flower boxes; I should have

something better to do with it; never mind what; I know. And I made yearly expeditions to the Alps, in the honest conviction that I pined to look upon salmon-hued Dolomite sunrises, or grey cloud oceans underfoot, or fantastic towering *séracs*, or virgin slopes of wind-carved snow. No such thing; it was the climbing-pole I wanted, as I now know very well; these others were the trimmings, & very good trimmings too, if such things were needed; but my three-mile run before breakfast to the sea & back, with the briefest of plunges in the middle of it, serves my purpose, I find, to admiration. My love of scenery was a fraud, one of those innocent youthful frauds that are only known for such by their authors in later days, & call for no very severe censure when they are detected; my real desire was not to see beautiful things as an end in itself, but to qualify for using sincerely about them the sort of language that was used by people who knew & admired them, & whom I knew & admired. There was the original motive, & then came in the attractions of the climbing-pole to divert my attention from the discovery that I was as little a genuine devotee of landscape beauty as they tell us the ancient classics were; since then I have reached analytic years, & must pronounce myself, however indulgently, a past impostor.

Such too is the history of my (or of what was to have been my) connoisseurship in pictures.

Any man who had spent as many hours as I have spent in the galleries of London & Paris, Rome & Florence, Berlin & Drésden, Munich & Frankfort, Antwerp & Venice, & had not done it like me (if I had only known it) against the grain, would be something of a critic. I well remember in the earlier days of this pursuit how I was caught by an athletic friend, who had no sympathy with it whatever, sitting over a book on Giotto & worshipping certain coloured reproductions there contained. His expressions, articulate & inarticulate, I will not try to reproduce; they amounted in effect to the pressing demand, What could I pretend to see in such daubs? It is the kind of question that even if you can answer to yourself you can hardly answer to the person who is likely to ask it; nor did I answer it. Being at the time, however, in the full tide of an enthusiasm that I had not yet realized to be factitious, I was not seriously embarrassed; the only difficulty was to give to my evasion (which at that age naturally took the form of 'There are more things in heaven & earth . . .') the precisely right intonation—playful enough for him to take it as a mere subterfuge & not be offended, earnest enough for me to feel that I was keeping my status of superior person as against the Philistines. This little diplomatic stroke I accomplished, & my cult was proof against any such rude assaults for many years; that it has now been abandoned is due to my having detected its nature for myself.

I never attained to knowing, nor even to having any confident opinion on the question, whether a given picture was beautiful or not; but I did attain to being able, as I walked through an unknown gallery, to guess at all the painters' names & be more often right than wrong, without stealing glances at the catalogue or the *quis pinxit* on canvas or frame. This is not an aesthetic, but an intellectual pleasure; it may also be practically valuable, if you happen to be an art dealer; I do not; nor indeed did I ever bring this faculty within measurable distance of the infallible; but it served the same purpose as the Alpine climbing-pole, & prevented me for long from finding out that I had quite lost sight of my original object. I found it out at last by visits to the Academy & the Salon, which I had before been by way of despising; these were to me meaningless blanks; there might be beautiful pictures in them, or there might not; what was that to me? I was drifting to & fro without my compass. I still love to go through an honest gallery or old-masters collection where one knows what to expect; to see how much of the attributive judgment has perished with disuse is interesting, &, when one is clearly convinced that it was a paltry power masquerading as something higher, not in the least mortifying. On my walls still hangs a relic or two—a delicate etching of a Van Eyck, a copy of a Botticelli Madonna, a cast of an ethereal little bas-relief; I never look at them except by

chance; but when I do, it is with affection for their associations.

Architecture is another grazing-ground on which I fed my passion for classification. I could do a little dating by masonry & moulding, vaulting & tracery: ogee & flying buttress, dogtooth & ball-flower, had their significance; I could patter—mostly, I am now glad to think, to myself—strings of queer words from Rickman & Fergusson & Parker. But whether the Partheñon would have moved me as it should have I gravely doubt; & it was probably an unsuspected suspicion of my own dullness in presence of mere beauty, where there was not much measuring, comparing, & ‘placing’ to be done, that prevented my going to Greece in due course.

About music I have never been able even to delude myself. It is true that I often indulge, when absolutely alone & out of all hearing, in snatches of what I take for melody; old ballads, Gilbert & Sullivan songs, & the like, give me an unaffected pleasure as performed by myself. But as early as my schooldays I had learnt that the word *harmony* was as mysterious & incomprehensible to me as the word *yellow* to a blind man. At an Oxford bump-supper, as someone sat down after singing *John Peel*, my neighbour observed to me that he had done it in (if I remember) four different keys. I had been quite satisfied, & was much distressed by this criticism, not because I was concerned for

the singer's credit, but because of this horrible reinforcement to my conscious deficiencies. Ever since, I have recognized that music is a sealed book, & have taken the greatest care to ascertain that no-one is within earshot when I allow my high or my low spirits to express themselves vocally; they very likely do so in a dozen keys at once.

Then again there is of course human beauty, which I suppose has had more effect on people's behaviour & happiness than all the other kinds of beauty put together. Well, I will not go quite so far as to say, Man delights not me, nor woman neither. I have a mild gratification in gazing at a fine specimen of either sex, a gratification just strong enough to balance the dislike I feel (a much stronger sentiment, but fortunately not so often excited) for the people who are conscious of their claims to admiration. I was reading an author a day or two ago as horribly self-conscious & introspective as myself—more horribly so to my taste, but much less horribly so to other people's—; & he lamented over the fact that he had always been too much occupied to fall in love. I have never fallen in love either, though I have not always been too much occupied; but I am not tempted to lament over it. I have indeed a much more definite impression than with pictures that this woman is beautiful & that is not; I like to contemplate the former; I like even, in my more sociable moments, to talk to her. But to decide



the momentous question which of them, if any, is the one that I should like to contemplate & talk to through life; to plunge into the social vortex by way of qualifying for deciding it rightly; to stay there until the decision could be converted into action; & afterwards to revolutionize my whole life in consequence of it—I stand aghast at the bare thought. I have some energy, I said. For instance, I like my letters on the earliest possible day; our post town is six miles away, & there is no Sunday delivery except at the head office; to gain those twenty-four hours I do not shrink from getting up at five on Sunday morning (which now in December is much the same as getting up at midnight) & walking my twelve miles. But my sense of ladies' beauty is not the sort of power that can set the wheels of my energy to work. Even in women, beauty is the one of good gifts that concerns me least of all. When Fate overtakes me—and it will have to be quick now if it is to tap me on the shoulder before I am safe in the sanctuary of old age—I can make a shrewd guess at what will be my wife's mental & moral equipment; at least I should say so if I did not know that Cupid was blind; but of her looks I have no shadow of prevision.

Perhaps I ought to be sad at having to confess, still more at myself discovering, all the illusions I have recited above. Am I sinking in the scale, becoming a mere materialist, & therefore willing to resign old aspirations & shamelessly renounce

the sense of beauty? or is it perhaps a real advance to find out & acquiesce in one's limitations? I cannot pretend to answer; I can only say that I have no consciousness of being a degraded & disappointed creature. I am much happier than when my illusions were with me; whether *because* they are no longer with me is another question. It only seems to me, incurable optimist that I am, that every new piece of self-knowledge, whatever its character, whether it would be regarded *a priori* with horror or with delight, is gratifying when it comes. Such are the consolations of foolish meditative recluses who feed upon their own vitals.

Meanwhile there is one department of beauty in which I do not find my sense so much astray as in the rest. That is literature; I have never the smallest doubt whether a book is good or bad or both or neither. There I do my judging intuitively, without needing to take account of critics & schools; & I will pronounce judgement (exclusively for my own benefit, though) as readily on a new writer about whom all the critics think differently as on a classic about whom they all say the same. It is a great satisfaction to find myself, without an effort at self-improvement, agreeing here in the main with the orthodox verdict, though with some particular differences such as encourage me to think the general agreement is not merely artificial. Reading only what I feel inclined to read, I choose the old & approved in the proportion of perhaps

a hundred to one of the modern (newspapers, indeed, excluded); which is about as it should be. One of my peculiarities is that the exquisite & Virgilian repels me; I resent Stevensonian elaboration of style as I resent being tactfully handled by a master or mistress of the social arts; these things are insults to all who have intelligencé enough to detect them. Another peculiarity, more general, is really regrettable, but much too obstinate for me to resist: My reader has no doubt gathered from all these papers that I am 'a colourless neutral sort of person. So in literature I tend to the negative view, & the negative virtues outweigh the positive; lucidity & faultlessness appeal to me more than they should; for the first instance that comes to hand, there is, I believe, a great deal of human nature & refreshing prejudice & rude vigour in Borrow; but I cannot read with patience a man who so murders the grammar. With a few such exceptions, however, I am in literature, what it is so delightful to be, spontaneously orthodox. There is no knowing what the future has in store for one; but I shall be seriously astonished if my notions of literary beauty either change or fade away; for I feel as if they were intuitive & unconventional.

With all the other forms of beauty it is far otherwise. Goethe devotes some pages to defending the truth of a German proverb: *Was man in der Jugend wünscht, hat man im Alter die Fülle*: What youth yearned for, age has enough of. I protest that my

youth yearned for the sense of beauty; has my age enough of it? Only, it would seem after the preceding confessions, in the interpretation that it does not want any more of it; which is not what the proverb meant, though I have purposely introduced a little ambiguity into the translation. But perhaps one cannot speak quite authoritatively about old age on the strength of a mere Pisgah survey taken from the hither side of fifty. I hope no-one will be unkind enough to suspect that in the earlier part of this essay there was an attempt to give an impression contrary to the words, & insinuate that the sense of beauty was not in such a bad way as it was said to be; far from me be such trickery! Still, there is time, at fifty; *die Fülle* may be my lot yet, though progress seems now to be quite the other way. So be it, if *it* likes!



*IF I HAD  
MANNERS*



## IF I HAD MANNERS

MANNERS makyth man, we are told. And what then maketh manners? Why, what else but man? that is the obvious answer; but it sets us spinning in one of those circles which, however virtuous they may be in some respects, are stigmatized by logic as vicious. There is as little satisfaction to be had out of it as of being told that the hen comes from the egg, & the egg from the hen, with endless iteration, for all we know, from & to eternity. It will be better perhaps to approach the subject from another direction, & ask rather what *are* manners. Then it may do for a definition to say that they are the arts by which men make themselves tolerable to each other; that will fit in well at any rate with manners makyth man; for man could clearly not be what he is defined to be, a social animal, if the specimens of him were mutually intolerable. The definition is too vague & all-embracing, however, for the present purpose; it includes the manners of all times, countries, & classes; what I want with a view to laying my case before the compassionate reader is an idea of the manners proper to the ordinary educated Englishman of today. Let me rehearse, something after the manner of Theophrastus, a few of the qualities that occur to me as most required of him:

To be entirely at his ease; to talk neither like a



book nor like the man in the street. To have neither a husky, a nasal, nor an inaudible voice—all of which are due to mental or moral rather than physical causes. To be unaware, or seem unaware, that he is being observed, yet know when he is annoying by loquacity & when by silence; to divine by instinct who can *take* a joke (in either sense), & who cannot; to be a quick physiognomist, but always ready to revise his impressions at a moment's notice. To belong equally to all of the company in which he finds himself, not to favoured members of it only; to abstain from drawing one of them for the benefit of the rest; to be appreciative & not critical, positive & not negative, rhetorical rather than logical. To have his laughter well under control; to be capable of looking in his neighbour's eyes, without being embarrassed either by what he finds or by what he does not find there. To retail the leading article as little as possible; to be able to say 'Yes' reasonably often when asked whether he has seen this, or read that, or takes interest in the other; to be ready to argue courteously even his own foregone conclusions; always to have a reserve of fluid opinions about him, for which he has collected some facts & cultivated some interest, without having cut & dried the results; always to have at need something worth saying, but be quite ready to suppress it when it can be done without.

This is of course, only a small selection of the

true requisites; nay, not even a deliberate selection, such as might be of some profit to the average man, but rather a list of some particulars that happen to have impressed myself, mostly because I am conspicuously lacking in them. I have indeed, broadly speaking, no manners; & if I venture to say anything about them, it is only after the fashion of a foreign traveller. The Frenchman who comes to inspect us, & prints his discoveries, knows very much less about us than we do ourselves; yet we read his ridiculous speculations with a keen & curious interest; even so I like to fancy sometimes that I know a good deal about manners, though they are in fact a foreign country to me. As things are, it is of the smallest consequence whether my manners are bad or good; for ninety-nine hundredths of my time I may say that I have, not good or bad manners, but quite literally none; for manners come into existence only where two or three are gathered together; & on most days a dozen words is as much as I have occasion to say to anyone but myself; it is extremely seldom that I have to take out my manners & put them on, as I might my dress coat; the last time I had to wear the latter, I found that it was slightly moth-eaten, though not so conspicuously as to be past use. Alas, why can one not buy a new suit of manners as easily as a dress coat, & make a respectable fresh start? but no; 'the manners do follow the temperature of the body' says Galen, if Burton's

rendering of him may be trusted; ἄμαχον δὲ κρύψαι τὸ συγγενὲς ἦθος<sup>1</sup>, thinks Pindar; & it is clear to me, after some struggles, that one may as well leave one's manners alone, & make shift with them as they are; I for one have chosen rather to find a situation in which my manners would do than try to find manners that would do in my situation.

It may have been noticed that I put down first in my list of requisites (though it was not designed to keep the order of importance, either absolutely or relatively to me) that of being at one's ease; it indeed includes, either presupposing or securing, most of the others; & it is known to me only by inference from its opposite, as health is known to the man who was born ill & lives an invalid. For I shall whisper to you, dear Anonymity, secrets that I have told to no other. Very innocent secrets, after all, but such as we hold on to tightest; for we are so strangely made that there is hardly any crime we would not sooner reveal against ourselves than a lack of breeding; but writing masked & cloaked one can perhaps manage it, & even snatch a fearful joy from such playing at revelation. ..

First, then, I am incurably shy. Now it is true that we are all apt to fancy ourselves shy, & sometimes acquaint our neighbours with the fancy, though we for the most part neither believe it very firmly ourselves nor should be at all well

<sup>1</sup> Resistless, uncloakable, is the nature that is born with a man.

pleased if they took us literally. And all this without dishonesty; for there are very few indeed who do not draw the line somewhere in assurance; & wherever the line is drawn, the mere consciousness of its existence entitles us to announce playfully that we are not exempt from this human weakness. So for instance I find Sir Thomas Browne proclaiming 'I am naturally bashful; nor hath conversation, age, or travel. been able to effront or enharden me'; as if one that was truly bashful would have endured either to say so in his own person, or to give conversation a fair chance of effronting him! And it is as vain for Cowper to say 'I am a shy animal, & want much kindness to make me easy'; it is but a toy shyness that can be eased by kindness; kindness is to the genuinely shy among the most distressing experiences, since it forces upon him the conviction that he may not even suffer unobserved. No; with most of the good people who tell us they are shy, shyness amounts only to a graceful softener of the manners, a valuable check perhaps on arrogance or overbearing; it does not stop them from doing a thing, but only from doing it in an unmannerly offensive way; *o fortunatos nimium sua si bona norint!*<sup>1</sup> mine is another sort of shyness altogether; it utterly changes my external programme, & banishes me to the *secretum iter et fallentis semita vitæ*<sup>2</sup>.

Secondly—though this is not independent, but

<sup>1</sup> Too blest, knew they but their blessings!

<sup>2</sup> The unfrequented way, the hidden bypath of life.

mainly a consequence of firstly, I am without all social experience: I have never so much as been at a dance; I do not know—yet attach importance to the question—whether it matters which arm I offer to a lady; I dare not drop in upon people I like for fear of finding others that I do not know, & being embarrassed; I am afraid to talk across a wide table or walk across a room, lest I should attract notice; I shrink from expressing admiration of a lady's singing, a man's book or opinions, as something like an insult or piece of presumption; I have not learnt to listen to t'other man without thinking all the time what I am going to say next; that is a chief necessity of decent manners, yet one of the most incomprehensible faculties for those who have not got it; there must be a good deal of quick wit required, to be intent on him, & yet not fail when your turn comes; most people have no doubt to compromise, & do a certain amount of simulation in their listening; but my simulation, for want of practice, is as transparent as air; & the experience that I know would set me at my ease in these matters I always avoid picking up, for fear of betraying that I am only now acquiring it. I am so much afraid of making a fool of myself that I remain a fool.

But though I had to reject the literary pretenders to shyness whom I quoted just now, I can produce at any rate one literary description of the state of mind that comes near being adequate, & with

it I shall take leave to adorn this page:—‘It so far troubles them, that they become quite moped many times, & so disheartened, dejected, they dare not come abroad, into strange companies especially, or manage their ordinary affairs; so childish, timorous, & bashful, they can look no man in the face. . . . And that makes them . . . to refuse honours, offices, & preferments, which sometimes fall into their mouths; they cannot speak, or put forth themselves, as others can; . . . they are contented with their present estate, unwilling to undertake any office, & therefore never likely to rise. For that cause, they seldom visit their friends, except some familiars; *pauciloqui*, of few words, & oftentimes wholly silent’. It is Burton, accounting for the inclusion of bashfulness among the causes of melancholy; which inclusion, indeed, is the only exception I take to his picture; for, to my personal & very intimate knowledge, one may be as bashful as ever anyone was, & keep melancholy nevertheless at arm’s length; but to that end you must let nature have her way; no flying in her face; accept the fact that you are what you are, take your measures accordingly, & you may very easily, as my author inconsistently admits, be contented with your present estate; you will not rise, it is true; but what then? some one else will instead, & you & he will both be better pleased than if you had climbed into your discomfort, & left him in his. That desire to rise, irrespective of your

specific gravity, is surely as queer a phenomenon as the relative positions we most of us assign, in deed though not in word, to our manners & our morals. As for me, I will not be ambitious & force nature, but stay cheerfully at home with my books; my manners will never worry them, nor therefore me at second hand; I shall have no manners, yet, in a sense, the best of manners. Bacon thought well enough of Livy's definition to import it for our use:—'The sum of behaviour is to retain a man's own dignity, without intruding upon the liberty of others'; both those points I shall attain, &, so far as manners go, be in the position of that fortunate one who 'having nothing, yet hath all'.

I have talked above of the topsy-turvy view we take of manners & morals, caring more in secret that we, & even that our associates, should do the things we do with a proper air than that we should do the proper things; & here I may be told that I am on a wrong track; morals & manners are not two things, but one; at most they are the inside & the outside, the manners the expression of the morals; manners would be perfect if only one were sympathetic & unselfish enough; & they will be perfect on no other terms. It is true; but it is one of the truths that, belonging only to the extreme case, are worthless when applied to the mixed cases of which life is made up; it is as true, & as useless, as that one would be happy if virtuous; absolute virtue would doubtless mean happiness,

but imperfect degrees of virtue do not bring with them corresponding degrees of happiness. So it is with unselfishness & manners; to those varieties of the latter which, being far from perfect, yet pass muster in this everyday world there are other elements that contribute effectively, however inferior in real merit they may be to the unselfishness that alone might give perfection. In reading travellers' tales it often surprises us, until we have learnt that they are all agreed upon it, to find that the gentleman of nations, the finest-mannered of earth's aristocrats, is the Turk. And why? well, it is easy to find two advantages, quite unconnected with unselfishness & sympathy, that he enjoys in a special degree. One is a serene self-confidence & indifference to events, based half on his being of a conquering caste, & half on his fatalism. He is content with things as they are; he is no reformer; from a reformer we are not to expect good manners; he is too much accustomed to treading on other people's toes to mind doing it in & out of season; when Lord Granville called himself, by way of exception, a radical who happened to like good society, he implied that radicals & good manners were almost, though not quite, incompatible; but we Westerns are, not some, but all of us radicals in respect of the polished Turk. And the Turk's other advantage is leisure; to have it, or at the least to have had it once & be able to call back at need the habits it engendered, is another of those effective



substitutes for unselfishness; for no-one is more intolerable than the man who lets it appear that he is doling you out a precious fragment of his valuable time.

Possibly, however, it might be found on closer examination that the Turk's manners were the better the less they were known—that they were good for impressing the alien, but not for much else. There is after all room for much of the merely external, & even the histrionic, in manners; we waver curiously in our views on that point, sometimes regarding them as far truer revelations of a man's character than his mere acts, & sometimes as nothing but artificiality. Not that the two views need be inconsistent; to know what has made a man run to one form of artificiality & not another is to be pretty deep in his character; but there is a great difference for practical purposes between the directly natural & the artificial that only skilful analysis shows to be ultimately nothing but nature.

Some of the artificialities themselves, however, are not individual, but generic, & these are easily allowed for. A royal personage, for instance, is expected to remember the name, and if possible some distinguishing characteristic, of everyone he has once talked with. Oddly enough, much the same is expected of the first-class London tailor; deal with him once, & walk into his shop some years after, he will give you good-morning with your name on the tip of his tongue as though you

had been there once a week or month. But these are things they do not because they are they, but because they are prince or tailor; these things do not count. So again, one who belongs to any section of society that rejoices to think itself exclusive must show himself, sometimes at the same moment, charmingly & conspicuously intimate with all who are inside his circle, & frigidly indifferent to those who are outside, almost unaware, indeed, that they exist. The combination is naturally very repulsive to the outsider; but, if he has any touch of sweet reasonableness, he readily makes allowance for what is only a generic & not an individual peculiarity. On the other hand, the hail-fellow-well-met manners that leave no room for higher degrees of cordiality at all, the too sympathetic that prompt daily inquiries after our casual acquaintance's casual headache, the diplomatic that make us as careful in speech as the conscientious testimonial-writer on paper, the consistently patronizing, or cold, or effusive—all these belong to the individual, spring from nature rather than from circumstances, & must be reckoned at their full value.

But I had better go no farther in this vein; all that I might find to say on the different kinds of manners must merely emphasize my inexperience, & convince the reader that I am nothing but the traveller in a foreign country that I told him of before. I will only add the charitable remark that *rude* comes from *rudis*, which is as much as to say

that most manners are due (like mine) to nothing worse than ignorance. We ill-mannered or no-mannered ones are among the refuse of mankind, yet do not find ourselves comfortable in either of the recognized subdivisions of that refuse; many of us feel quite sure that we are not, on any liberal construction, knaves, & very doubtful whether we are fools; I think we must plead for a triple division instead of the ancient double one, into knaves, fools, & boors, in the last of which we shall feel more at home.

And if my sigh were responded to, & I had manners—? Why, I might be a dweller in towered cities instead of in this *angulus terrae*, a diner-out instead of a hermit, a paterfamilias instead of a lone lorn man, a member of Parliament instead of a writer of books. But indeed the possibilities that depend on that little change are so vast and important that I dare not discuss them in public; my private thoughts they exercise as fascinatingly as the old problem, What & where should we have been now, if Hannibal had taken Rome?

*IF I HAD  
A PHILOSOPHY*



## IF I HAD A PHILOSOPHY

**D**ID I tell the reader, in any previous fit of candour, that one of my friends is accustomed to speak of me in my presence, & for aught I know behind my back, as the prig? It is so, at any rate; nor, though I am not a prig, do I at all resent the name—perhaps because I think it bears in it the gratifying assurance of its own falsity; for it is one of those moderately damnatory words that, being the deadliest of all insults if they can be taken at their face value, are not ventured unless they are safe.

Time was that in another circle—now for me no more than a memory—I went by another name; they would dignify me now & then as the philosopher. Philosophers are extremely rare, rarer out of all proportion than prigs; & my claims to the more honourable title were immeasurably less than to the other. Nor indeed were my friends under any delusions regarding my metaphysical or other learned attainments; they did not suspect me of having solved the riddle of the universe, or of having charted & delimited the provinces of human knowledge, or even—which is perhaps the least that can be demanded of an authentic philosopher—of being the unfailing exponent in practice of a reasoned ethical code. But the status of philosopher can sometimes be purchased at a much cheaper rate than any of these. Perhaps they were thinking of

the philosophy that is rather a temperament than an intellectual system, & little more than a synonym for the now very unfashionable virtue whose older name was contentment. For 'taking things philosophically' I have always had a turn. I would not boast that my philosophy of this sort is equal to all possible contingencies—though it does give one a great advantage in this respect to have no prejudice against 'playing the Roman fool' if things should come to the worst—; 'I only say that circumstances have never yet arisen that have been too much for it. A clear majority, perhaps, of persons outside the labouring class would think fate was very unkind if they found themselves at fifty living on a poor hundred pounds a year; that is my position, but I am on the best of terms with fate. I quote that instance of my taking things philosophically, not because it seems to me a striking one (on the contrary, I find it the most natural thing in the world), but because I am sometimes given to understand that it does strike other people.

However slight my pretence to taking things philosophically, & whether my old nickname is to be traced to a reputation for that faculty or not (for there are other cheap ways of gaining the name, to be touched on later), I confess that I love the good easy men who do it, that I love myself the more in so far as I think I do 't, & that I love the phrase itself. I shall indeed allow myself the

pleasure of enlarging a little upon the matter. 'He takes things philosophically': to say it is to bear witness to the essential truth of that Stoic doctrine, To the wise man phenomena are indifferent; we can put it in other words, If your treasure is in heaven, earthly things are of no great moment; only, what & where is heaven? It is a temper in the mind, say the Stoics, & they are surely the 'philosophers' that our phrase commemorates; it was the Stoic Emperor who wrote: End thy journey in content, just as an olive falls off when it is ripe, blessing nature who produced it & thanking the tree on which it grew. But, I must not lead the reader to suppose that I am a Stoic; that would be to have a philosophy; in which case there would have been no excuse for writing this essay. I have not *a* philosophy, alas!—only at the utmost philosophy without the article, & that in the most popular & least intellectual sense. In that popular sense, indeed, I flatter myself that I carry philosophy pretty far. Epictetus (at least so Bacon assures me) makes three classes in wisdom:—'One of the vulgar, in any ill that happens to him, blames others; a novice in philosophy blames himself; & a philosopher blames neither the one nor the other'. Tried by this test, I am a complete philosopher; but the odd thing is that I fancy I must have been born complete; I have never, so far as memory serves, been through either the vulgar or the novice stage; I was always,



in a quiet way, & without making a parade of it, a creature pleased with himself, whom all the world can please; yet no legends of precocity attach to my childhood, nor do I see any likelihood of my rivalling Plato, Descartes, or Hegel. But then my philosophy consists, as I have explained, in taking things as they come, a method that no-one would impute to any of those great men; they all subjected 'things' to the most surprising processes of transmutation, as do all the giants of the intellect whose philosophy is of the mental & not the merely temperamental kind; our own great modern philosopher, who holds the scales with such easy superiority between Doubt & Belief, shows us sometimes when he turns to the lighter task of guiding an empire how political 'things' too can be & not be as the lights are varied. No, indeed; the philosophy of taking things as they come is not of that transcendent thaumaturgic kind.

It is philosophy in the humblest of all acceptations, then, this only kind to which I have any pretence; & not to fall shorter than I need of complete honesty, I must add that, of the many different foundations on which even this kind may be based, my foundation is by no means the most admirable. It is a perfectly boundless self-confidence—secret, I hope, except as between me & the reader, but never shaken. If I lose a place of emolument, I am not disturbed; for I never doubt that I shall get a better when I choose; if I cannot make head or

tail of a train of reasoning, why of course it is not worth understanding; if the public does not buy my book, why so much the worse for the public; if they withhold from me my (*my*, I say) first prize, why, poor blind judges! I shrug my shoulders at them all; am I not Egomet still, let them do the worst they can?

But, though the foundation of my equanimity is this unfailing self-confidence, it has also a variety of buttresses. When I come across a sentence that calls my attention to any of these, I am fond of jotting it down, & I will venture to try my reader's patience with a few of them. To begin with, *Strangua nos exercet inertia*<sup>1</sup>; I have always had occupation that has filled my time without putting any strain whatever upon my faculties; I am one of *Die Menschen die ihr Leben in einer bequemen Geschäftigkeit hinträumen*<sup>2</sup>; & my days pass consequently *dans un de ces bonheurs complets, n'appartenant sans doute qu'aux occupations médiocres, qui amusent l'intelligence par des difficultés faciles, et l'assouvissent en une réalisation au delà de laquelle il n'y a pas à rêver*<sup>3</sup>. Writing essays (of which it will perhaps be granted that the *difficultés* are *faciles*) has been the *occupation médiocre* of the last few years; &, if one cannot be always

<sup>1</sup> A busy idleness keeps me astir.

<sup>2</sup> Those who dream their life away in placid industry.

<sup>3</sup> In the kind of unbroken contentment peculiar to unexciting pursuits; their simple problems just keep the mind agog, to be quieted with full solutions that leave no speculative 'beyonds'.

writing, nothing easier than to fill up the gaps with gathering parallel sentiments from Horace, Goethe, & Flaubert.'

Then another buttress is a very profound belief that fruition is a poor thing indeed compared with anticipation. *In der Sehnsucht ruht das grösste Glück*<sup>1</sup>, says one of my authorities; & another: 'I was accustomed to felicitate myself on the certainty of a happy life which I enjoyed, through placing my happiness in something durable & distant, in which some progress might be always making, while it could never be exhausted by complete attainment'. Mill was an altruist, & his distant something, if I remember right, was the perfecting of his country's institutions; mine, poor egotist, was only the perfecting of myself; but it is an object not less durable & distant.

Another buttress is an entire inability to see that it at all matters whether I am to have another life when this shall be over, or another day when this sun has set; *Lusisti satis, edisti satis, atque bibisti: Tempus abire tibi est*<sup>2</sup>; I was quite ready to subscribe to that, I think, the first time I saw it, which was presumably at school.

And yet another buttress is that, whenever my income has threatened to fall short of my requirements, I can easily solace myself with turning for

<sup>1</sup> In yearning lies our highest bliss.

<sup>2</sup> Thou hast had thy fill of play & meat & drink: 'tis time thou shouldst depart.

an oracle to the wise men of an age when contentment was still a virtue. To read in Burton: *Ubi plurima fortuna, ibi mens perexigua*: great wealth & little wit go commonly together: is as consolatory to me as if it were true. And Sir Thomas Browne is nectar & ambrosia to me: 'Tis I confess the common fate of men, of singular gifts of mind to be destitute of those of fortune; which doth not any way deject the spirit of wiser judgements who thoroughly understand the justice of this proceeding; & being enriched with higher donatives cast a more careless eye on these vulgar parts of felicity. . . . To wiser desires it is satisfaction enough to deserve, though not to enjoy, the favours of fortune. Let providence provide for fools: 'tis not partiality but equity in God, who deals with us but as our natural parents. Those that are able of body & mind he leaves to their deserts; to those of weaker merits he imparts a larger portion; & pieces out the defect of one by the excess of the other'. But I had better leave the other buttresses alone, if there is danger of their tempting me to quotations of this length. Suffice it that, whatever the reason, I do take things philosophically, to a degree that may perhaps have justified my nickname.

But, as I said, there are other good bargains in philosophic reputation. A very slight tendency to generalize or moralize will go quite a long way towards qualifying one. Now, however incapable

of really grappling with the abstrusenesses of philosophy, or following a long argument without losing my place, I like to be in a philosophic atmosphere. Not only do I occasionally attempt to carry out some of the real philosophers' ethical conclusions, but I have a few vague impressions on such questions, say, as man's place in the universe, the freedom of the will, the basis of morals, miracles, immortality of the soul, the relative value of chastity & good temper, the boundary between morals & foreign politics; it is true I take the greatest care not to air any of these when anyone is in company whom I can suspect of being a controversialist; for I know too well that the simplest Socratic treatment will turn me inside out; but nevertheless these questions have an interest for me, which is allowed to peep shyly out in safe company. Moreover, I have some of the characteristics of Mr Shandy, who, it will be remembered, was 'much given to close reasoning upon the smallest matters', being indeed counted among 'the minutest philosophers, who by the bye have the most enlarged understandings (their souls being inversely as their inquiries)'. Nothing gives me greater satisfaction than to pursue some entirely unpractical inquiry to considerable lengths; to reconcile & track to their origin, perhaps, the queer inconsistent views that different people hold on humour & the humorous; to draw up a novel *lie casuistry*, with all possible types neatly disposed this side & that of

the line of permissibility; to abolish history temporarily, & design on the *tabula rasa* a whole unexceptionable sexual morality: History must be abolished, I say; for generalizations are easily upset by hard facts; & if you have the philosophic temper, but not the philosophic intellect, the only way to gratify it is to generalize without facts. As for me, I take all knowledge for my province, & pass lightly from one department of it to another, without letting myself be engaged & bogged in only one spot. I am 'not to be a slave of one science or dwell altogether in one subject, as most do, but to rove abroad, *centum puer artium*, to taste of every dish, & to sip of every cup'. It is Democritus Junior who gives me that piece of encouragement; but I can find higher authority than his:—'Those' says Bacon 'that study particular sciences & neglect philosophy are like Penelope's wooers that made love to the waiting women'. No waiting women for me; even now that I am a literary man I refuse to take up with a special subject; I prefer to meditate in print on things in general; it pays poorly in coin, but very richly in self-satisfaction; & moreover, which is the point in this paper, it is the second cheap way of earning the title of philosopher, & perhaps earned it for me.

The list, however, is by no means exhausted; but I shall hope to get through my three remaining cheap methods more briefly. The third cheap philosopher is well known. Everyone remembers

that during his time at school there were at least two or three members of his house who were generally described as mad; everyone is aware also that if he had been asked to justify the epithet, his answer would have been little more informing than Polonius's: 'To define true madness, What is't but to be nothing else but mad?'; for the offenders' actions are in fact eminently sane. Their peculiarity was merely, as one can see on looking back from the superior height of adult wisdom, that they had different aims from the rest of us; they preferred happiness to success; or, to say the same thing in other words, they acted on their own notions, & not on other people's, of what was to be desired. Those whom their schoolfellows called mad their later acquaintance describe, with more contempt than envy, yet with a touch of both, as philosophers. They only mean that we (for I lay claim to this madness & this philosophy)—that we know what we like. And let me remind anyone who finds me too presumptuous that the moralist's technical term for us is nothing more flattering after all than Egoistic Hedonists—a description that he need not grudge me.

The fourth cheap philosophy I shall rather plead guilty of than lay claim to; for I am a little ashamed of excess in this direction. Roughly & unscientifically, one divides the natural world into five orders, in respect of life & feeling. First, the minerals have neither; secondly, the plants have life, but no

feeling; thirdly, the lower animals have feeling, but no consciousness of it; fourthly, men have consciousness of their feeling, but no consciousness of their consciousness; & lastly, philosophers have the compound consciousness. In that sense too I am a philosopher; I do not like to state how large a proportion of my time I devote to pulling about my own consciousness. It is a fascinating occupation, of which the delights never pall.

One more cheap method will complete the list. I am very little an actor, & very much a looker-on, in the game of life: 'A meer spectator of other men's fortunes & adventures, & how they act their parts, which methinks are presented unto me as from a common theatre or scene'. I can even do very well, if need arises, without the external theatre, & amuse myself after the fashion of another of my authors: 'I am in no way facetious, nor disposed for the mirth and galliardise of company; yet in one dream I can compose a whole comedy, behold the acts, apprehend the jests, & laugh myself awake at the conceits thereof'. But then the need hardly does arise in our day. It is quite unnecessary to wander like Ulysses to sate *l'ardore Ch' i' ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto E degli vizi umani e del valore*<sup>1</sup>; you may Ulyssize in your armchair now, & be or feel yourself *del mondo esperto* for a poor pennyworth of news daily; the true value of

<sup>1</sup> The longing that possessed me to know the world & the sins & the worth of men.



the newspaper in this direction is hardly recognized; with a daily fresh batch of material for practical philosophizing, we need not spin our webs from our own insides & confine ourselves to deduction like our ancestors; we can go inductively to work, & yet take our ease the while; further information is always pouring in to test our theories for us.

All these minor philosophies, then, I have: I take things as they come; I revel in generalities; I know what I like; I study my own emotions; & I am a looker-on. But the higher philosophy sets my brain spinning; its walks are to me *inextricabilis error*<sup>1</sup>. Not but what I make my little periodical attacks upon it; oh, I have yearnings towards the light, I assure you. I go through half a dozen dialogues of Plato, & try if they will mean more to me than they meant last time, endeavouring conscientiously to leave the humour & the irony alone, & to keep my wandering wits severely fixed on the inner significance. Or I please myself with thinking, through a few austere pages of Spinoza, that I am at last going to have my ethics as securely built upon as irrefragable axioms as those elements of geometry that I heartily accepted at school, & still, though I have forgotten what they were, believe in as heartily as ever. Or I surrender myself to be persuaded & dissuaded, turned round & round like a weathercock in a shifting gale, by the

<sup>1</sup>. A maze.

objections & counter-objections of judicious & judicial Henry Sidgwick. But it is always the same. Flutterings round the light profit me no more than they do a silly moth. They are not, indeed, so disastrous; I do not burn my wings like it; but that is because I never get to such close quarters with the object of my adoration; my pursuit of philosophy is the desire of the moth, not for an earthly approachable lamp, which is fatal, but, which is harmless if vain, for a star.



*IF I HAD  
A CAT*



## IF I HAD A CAT

I AM often asked by those who disapprove my way of life, & know what is good for me better than myself, why, if I must live alone, I do not at least keep an animal to relieve my solitude; had not Jerome his lion, Faust his poodle, captives their mice & spiders, every witch her cat, & solitaires & eccentrics in general their familiars? I am not playing the game according to the rules, they say. I used to tell them, for want of a better reason, that if dogs and cats would not grow old & die, still more if puppies & kittens would not become dogs & cats, but remain ever full of youthful antics, I might venture the experiment; but would not wantonly inflict upon myself another ever-present memento of change & decay. That answer was never meant for more than a conversational stop-gap; & in the light of recent experience it is so palpably false that I shall not be able to make it again; I regret it; for it is a great comfort to have ready a stock answer to a stock question, & proportionately distressing when a well tried one at last fails & a new one must be provided; but my conscience permits me to lie only on the spur of the moment, not to tell the same lie over & over when I have fully recognized it for what it is.

But no boasting of my virtues. I may perhaps be allowed to remark by the way, however, that to ask a hermit why he does not keep a dog, like

asking a vegetarian whether he still keeps well without meat, a winter bather what the water was like this morning, or a reviewer how he manages to get through so many books, is, besides being less fresh & original than one aims at being, to put a severe strain on their veracity. It is true that, as the questioner does not at all heed the answer, it matters little whether the questioned is truthful or not; still, he owes it to himself either to serve up a new answer each time, or else to produce the old with a convincing air of novelty—a tax that will be light or heavy as his balance of vital spirits fluctuates.

The answer that I am now inclining to adopt for the future is that I have in me little of the engrossing or monopolizing temper; I sympathize with the ancient Athenians whom Demosthenes commends for having private homes so modest & public buildings so splendid; I like the wild flowers in field or wood, to which I have no more right than other people, better than those that grow in my own garden or glow in my own vases (or would there grow & glow if I possessed either of those luxuries); & similarly in animals I yearn for no proprietary rights, & am fully content with any voluntary, casual, unchartered attentions that other people's dogs & cats may be willing to spare me. Nor, on those terms, can I complain that circumstances have dealt grudgingly with me; there are dogs in plenty about, whose partial recognition I

gladly take, congratulating myself that I am not exclusive patron & slave to any of them.

The collie, who is *grand seigneur* of the settlement, graced with faultless manners, condescends to walk daily with me to the post-office, holding one end of my stick while I hold the other; he also greets me with charming politeness & at least a well counterfeited pleasure, though short of enthusiasm, once or more of a morning; & with these two performances our dealings end. The black retriever, with unfortunately docked tail, but admirably earnest grey eyes, is always ready, if I will provide the necessary sugar, oatcake, or other innocent dainty, to exhibit for me his utter inability to miss the most difficult catch. No; by an *ad hoc* examination, I find that his eyes are not grey, but cinnamon; it must have been their exquisite seriousness that had left the impression of greyness, by analogy with that in some human eyes; he looks straighter & steadier at one than most dogs can, with an unconscious *sans-peur-et-sans-reproche* expression that is very striking. The little fox-terrier bitch appeals frequently for that admission to my cell which she knows too well is not permitted, & which she never takes unpermitted; or squats herself in my path & represents with beseeching looks & quivering tail that she is a humble little thing, but I really might vouchsafe her more notice than I do. 'The black dog', to which my reader has been previously introduced, presents himself at stated hours &



abolishes for me my inconvenient remainders—even sometimes slinks a few yards at my left rear when I go out, & dares a furtive lick or two of the hand. The brindled terrier, a formidable creature, is to be heard now & then, when unowned food is about, overawing most of the others (all, except the black dog, much his juniors) with a peculiarly virulent high rattling growl that he has cultivated & finds extremely paying; he too—for like the black dog he is a poor man's dog, & underfed—, though he does not stoop to ask food of me, deigns to connive at my offering it if I will. I am in fact an item, though a very unimportant one, in the lives of all these five, but can do excellently well without having any of them specially devoted to me.

Cats are also numerous, with idiosyncrasies as distinct (if I could be so misguided as to try my reader with a second *catalogue raisonné*) as those that I have summarized for the dogs. My reason for putting a cat rather than a dog into my title is that I have lately made an involuntary trial of the former. My next neighbour in the settlement, a hundred yards distant, with whom I am on most cordial terms, exchanging speech with him at the least once a week, entertains two, mother & daughter, of which the latter is a most prepossessing young virgin, between cat & kitten, a Diana for grace & activity, & as well disposed as that goddess to confirmed bachelors like us. My neighbour, having occasion to be away for a month, secured

a hireling to give his cats their regular & rather luxurious meals, directed that convenient windows should always be open for their exits & entries, & made over his cottage to them as absolute mistresses, entreating me to oversee the hireling now & again. The purveying was done, as far as I could observe, with regularity; but a kitten at these tender years, or months, has not yet developed the grossly material mood that may come with fuller experience of life; food is to her nothing—provided, of course, it comes in due abundance & of proper quality—; it is human companionship, the human hand, the human legs, she yearns for; & the delight she exhibited during my visits was so unaffected & extravagant that my heart was touched. I was at the same time slightly revolted; it was not, seemingly, the touch of a vanished hand, that mattered so much to her; the touch of any other hand would do nearly if not quite as well; but the touch of some hand was clearly a need that it was cruelty to deny her. One day, then, aware that I had fish to cook for dinner, which might make amends for the other inferiorities of my abode as compared with hers, I invited her to spend the afternoon & dine.

Being hitherto acquainted, probably, with only one domestic interior, she was intensely interested in my economy, & before the afternoon was over knew the contents of every nook & cranny, only punctuating her investigations with an occasional

purring passage between my legs & the fire. At tea-time she gave me to understand that a saucer of milk would be appropriate; I acted upon the suggestion, but, unused to the impulsive ways of these young animals, was surprised by her leaping three feet to meet it & dispersing the contents in all directions; the floor-covering being of linoleum, & non-absorbent, she happily recovered perhaps half the amount, & left me to wipe up the remainder. I cook & sweep & scrub for myself, as a hermit should; & the preparation of that dinner was the most hazardous cooking enterprise that I have yet carried through. Such is the philanthropy of this little creature that she would far rather be kicked & trampled with whatever unmeant severity, or even, as often happened, be sprinkled with the boiling water, or other hot liquid that a sudden discovery of something soft & living underfoot causes to be spilt, than be parted by half a yard from her human companion.

Why not shut her, says the reader, out of the kitchen? Yes, that must be explained; I have spoken, I think, of my cottage, & of my cell; one description is as literally true as the other; what outside is a cottage is internally a room; not rooms, but a room; it knows no doors nor partitions, that is. An ample bookcase, indeed, veils the penetralia of the part sacred to sleep; but it is circumnavigable at either end, & does not reach the ceiling. Similarly, a curtain can at need cut off the view of what

from outside looks like a conservatory, but is in fact a kitchen & scullery; cats, however, laugh at curtains. Then why not shut her, resumes the reader, out of this dwelling-box altogether? Why, it was tempestuous with wind & rain, no night for mine enemy's dog, still less to be thought of for my neighbour's cat & my own invited guest. But if she had jeopardized the cooking, she approved the cookery; & except for some pulls at the cloth, not fatal, though dangerous because of my bachelor table's small size, we got through dinner well pleased with each other.

Washing-up, if I may allude to such things, followed, in the course of which I discovered that my neighbour must wear much thicker clothes than I. Being now upright & still, I was treated as a convenient climbing-post, into any part of which claws might be fastened without ceremony; & my thighs (especially) still bear the marks. This, though trying while it lasted, was soon over, & I settled down as usual to read & write in an armchair over the fire, having first placed another for my guest & established her in it well within reach of the warmth.

She was for perhaps five minutes visibly gratified with this combination of dignity & luxury, & for another five revealed a clear consciousness that her throne was also designed for her prison; for, though evidently desiring to leave it, she did no more than stretch out an appealing paw in my direction. I

gave no encouragement; but cats, if perhaps vaguely aware of a hierarchy in creation, do not go so far as to believe that the will of the higher orders is to be a law unto the lower; they would rather have permission for their proceedings than not; but, if it is not to be had, why, really, they can do without. After feigning submission, so as to take me by surprise, for a moment or two, she suddenly with a flying leap landed on my shoulder. In my chair, a tight-fitting one, there was really not room for two; she had necessarily to occupy, not part of my chair, but part of me; & for most of the next two hours, though I periodically & ineffectually restored her to her own place, she conducted as thorough an investigation into my person as she had before dinner into my property. This I suffered in the constant hope that she would soon have exhausted my points of interest, & would settle down, if not in her own chair, at least permanently on one of my shoulders, arms, or knees; or if it had been my head, even that I could have spared her. Unfortunately, she viewed each fresh start of my pencil on the paper as the renewal of a game contrived for her amusement; & her finger in the pie converted it to one more resembling that named after the printers than any other known to me.

Not to dwell further upon those two hours, I decided between ten & eleven o'clock that it was time for a young thing like her to be getting home,

&, as it still rained in torrents, assumed my mackintosh, & under the cape of it conveyed her dry till she was within her own door. 'Farewell, my dear'; I said, 'it is sad that your first visit to me should be your last; but so it must; crabbed age & youth cannot live together'. How my neighbour endures is a wonder to me; but for one thing he is much younger than I, & for another he has doors in his cottage, of which I have never felt the need before.

It was perhaps five minutes after I had hung up the mackintosh when a soft thud was heard on the linoleum behind the bookcase. She had entered through the open window by my bed, & now advanced, rather wet, & began to dry herself in a very business-like way against my legs. If she could come one way in the rain, she could go the other; I deposited her pitilessly outside the door. She was soon with me again, a little wetter than before; I ejected her, with a slight smack of the head, not hard enough to hurt, but, I hoped, enough to call her attention to that higher will which must be obeyed. This performance was repeated ten times, she a little wetter, my smack a thought harder, at each; & we finally concluded that all windows must be shut, which to me, who am as greedy of air as a wise consumptive, is serious deprivation. It availed me for the night; for I could harden my heart against all plaintive mewings; but no sooner had I let in the morning air

than I found myself again the victim of my young admirer's misplaced affection.

That day I spent with all windows shut for hours, & open for minutes, devoting most of it to setting up a trellis-work of twine with inch-square openings, that should allow me to have as much air, & as little cat, as I desired at night. Night came; I had slept an hour when I was waked by a not unmusical sound of vibrating strings. She was silhouetted against the sky, within a yard or two of me, plucking at one thread after another with inexhaustible patience. I lay & watched & chuckled with, I confess, inhuman enjoyment, having confidence in my handiwork. Three-quarters of an hour the siege lasted, at the end of which, instead of raising it as I expected, she walked quietly through, & jumped purring proudly on my bed. How it was done I cannot tell; the trellis was still sound, & looking, even after the event, as if it was meant rather against rats than cats.

I closed the window, & placed her gently outside the door; as for smacking, I could not venture that; I knew too well that she felt the moral victory was hers. Next day I fitted the top halves of all my five windows with wire netting; after some attempts by day & night she accepted the situation with dignity, & I now dwell quiet & secure, after the manner of the Sidonians, those payers of tribute & lovers of peace. For *my* peace I have had to pay the tribute of wire netting to my enemy & virtual

conqueror; she receives my visits still with kindness; but it is a kindness tinged with condescension; she is aware, methinks, that those who dwell in fenced cities are the weak & unwarlike; did not the Spartans boast that their abode was safe without walls? Well, her owner returns to-morrow, & when I have taken down & forgotten the wire, I shall hope gradually to recover my self-respect.

At present, however, I have hardly got over speculating what it is that unfits me for the society of animals; they serve so many various ends, of which some surely (as my rare visitors above mentioned observe truly, if too often) should commend them to me. A cat or a dog is something to play with, something to protect, something to bully, something to be dependent on you; something to sympathize with you, to abolish solitude, to take a lenient view of you, to have no secrets from, to talk to without being too well understood; something to observe, to study the primitive instincts in, to remind you of your high place in creation; even—not to shrink from sentiment—something to love. In spite of all which, I care not, I (though I ‘rather would see them than not see’, provided it might be at a sufficient distance, & not too often, as one likes to see children), if the whole of the two races were to perish from this moment. I am too individualistic, self-centred, unsympathetic, reasonable, unsociable, occupied, to be susceptible to any of their fascinations.



## IF WISHES WERE HORSES

. I can now, however, fill up the blank in my heading with more precision than in most of these papers. If I had a cat, I should recognize the equality of her right-to-exist with my own just so far as to toss up with her—heads, I drown you: tails, I shoot myself.

*IF I HAD  
A WISH*



## IF I HAD A WISH

I MUST not give the impression, even at starting, that I have, as the phrase goes, not a wish in the world. That would be to make myself out a monster of contentment, to fill those who believed me with envy & those who did not with contempt, besides inviting the attention of Nemesis. It is quite true that I am in fact a tolerably contented person; any book that I send to a publisher is pretty sure to come back with some allusion to the wide reading & the cheerfulness of temper to which it bears witness. I sadly fear that 'wide reading' is only publisher's euphemistic for plagiarism; yet at least I need not feel that I am boasting or giving my unsupported opinion as indisputable fact when I lay claim to a contented spirit; but I confess that I have a wish or two, for all that; my reader, indeed, has it on record that I have committed myself to several in the course of this little book; & it would have been big instead of little if consideration for his time had not forbidden me to draw up a votary paper of this sort for every want that I am conscious of. But the fact is that, being now at my epilogue, & the thought forcing itself upon me that some may say my epilogue & prologue might as well have been one, & all that lies between have been omitted, I have been led to serious reflections upon the vanity of human wishes, & have set myself to consider whether in my wishes, for instance, there

is any element *but* vanity. The vanity of wishes is often revealed after they have been fulfilled, or after their fulfilment 'has become impossible; but it would be much more satisfactory to know whether they were vain before instead of after. To which end I interrogate myself thus: If wishes were horses, beggars would ride; but does this particular beggar really wish to ride, or does he not? that is the question. Accordingly, the 'wish' in my heading is one of the mythical centaur sort, wish & horse in one; no sooner is the wish formed than it is to solidify into fact. Providence engages, I suppose, to grant me anything that I ask of it, at my peril; shall I adventure, or shall I not? & if so, in what direction? I must stipulate, however, that it is not to play practical jokes upon me; Zeus was no better than an attorney when he insisted that Midas had bargained for *everything* he touched to become gold; my Providence is to be a gentleman, & not a legal gentleman.

Allas, why pleynen folk so in commune  
 Of purveyaunce of God, or of fortune,  
 That yeveth hem ful ofte in many a gyse  
 Wel bettre than they can hem-self devyse?  
 Som man desyreth for to han richesse,  
 That cause is of his mordre or greet siknesse.  
 And som man wolde out of his prison fayn,  
 That in his hous is of his meynee slayn.  
 Infinite harmes ben in this matere;  
 We witen nat what thing we preyen here.

## IF I HAD A WISH

We faren as he that dronke is as a mous;  
 A dronke man wot wel he hath an hous,  
 But he noot which the righte wey is thider;  
 And to a dronke man the wey is slider.  
 And certes, in this world so faren we;  
 We seken faste after felicitye,  
 But we goon wronge ful often, trewely.

That piece of wisdom postulates two beliefs for its foundation; one is that there is a Providence seeing to it with care that each separate one of us, if he is properly submissive, shall have the precise things that are best for him; & the other is that the same Providence, if anyone doubts this & presumes to have an opinion on what is good for himself, is both willing & able to show him that such independence is naughty. For the first belief, some of the preceding papers have made it clear that I cannot bring myself to hold it; & for the second, I hereby contract out of it; any wish that I may now be led to express being imaginary & not binding. I have the game in my hands & can make the conditions before I begin; if I ask for apples, then, they are not to turn out Dead Sea counterfeits; human probability, not special-providential malice, is to be our atmosphere; no deceptions; *quo mihi fortunam, si non conceditur uti?*<sup>1</sup>

Reading in Lucian the other day, I came upon a piece that he calls *Εὐχαί*—Prayers or Wishes. Now Lucian is not often disappointing; nor in some

<sup>1</sup> What avails a prize that you are forbidden to make use of?

respects has his right hand lost her cunning even here; he is, as usual, entertaining; the odd thing is that his wishers' ideas should be so strangely crude as they are. There are four of them; the first takes wealth, the second conquest, the third a selection of Gyges rings adding to invisibility some other gifts of the same magical sort; & the fourth, after pricking these three bubbles, can do no better for himself than to resign his right to a wish altogether. Which is absurd; there are surely things in the world worth a wish; or at any rate one has not proved the contrary till one has bid at least as high as Solomon; he, poor man, it is true, did not find wisdom so all-satisfying as he had hoped; but then one cannot help doubting whether he really got it; unless a pretence was palmed off on him, how account for all those wives? Lucian's crudity here, however, is a most gratifying measure of the world's progress since his time; his wishers are educated men; for the non-wisher parts from them with the jeering reminder that they call themselves philosophers; but it is hardly conceivable that any educated man of today, with the momentous decision before him, would stop short at mere materialities; he might perhaps be cowed, though, by the awful infinity of choice; it would be cruel, with such possibilities, to find that one had taken anything but the best bargain.

But it may be well to say a word or two about some of these philosophers' wishes, which I have

dismissed perhaps too unceremoniously. Is it true that no educated man would make wealth his choice today? The present age has the credit or discredit, in its own judgement (but then our judgements about ourselves are notoriously fallacious), of carrying the worship of wealth further than any other ever carried it; there are plenty of sensible persons who will not scruple to admit that the acquisition of money is their grand pursuit; they think they have sufficiently justified themselves when they have explained that they want it not for itself, but for the innumerable good things, not all of a grossly material kind, & including especially the choice of society, that it brings; they are good Baconians; 'Fortune' they say 'is to be honoured & respected, if it were but for her two daughters, Confidence and Reputation'. That is a good enough defence, so far as it goes; such an apologist is of course not playing at our game; if we put it to him that things of a less external kind, as guaranteed health, or as wisdom, were better worth wishing for, he would answer that he tried for money because, though less desirable, it was more attainable; health is either to be had with little or no trouble, or else not to be had at all; & wisdom is not to be won half so easily or quickly as money. His pursuit is conditioned; but our imaginary wish is unconditional; money is a good thing if you cannot have a better; it is not many of us that would refuse a fortune, however convinced that



they might be the worse for it, if the only question were between having it & not having; not I, for one; but the question I am concerned with is between having it & having something else. So I have no quarrel with the money-grubbers, though for my part I adopt on this subject the sentiment of a modern novelist: 'I am one of those that never take on about princely fortunes, & am quite content if the world is ready to board & lodge me'.

So much for the first of those ancient wishes; the second, which was conquest, we may pass over as appealing to very few indeed in these enlightened, experienced, democratic days; but the Gyges rings amounting in the sum to the gift of irresponsibility, the being able to do whatever you like without taking any of the usual consequences—that wish has indeed an eternal fascination even for the least, or perhaps especially for the least, imaginative of us. Yet, if wishes were horses, I doubt whether the man could be found (educated, we said) with self-confidence so sublime, or recklessness so complete, as to take the risks. Nevertheless, a limited tenure of the Gyges rings—what a surprising illumination it would throw, to be sure, on the reality, or the true motives, of one's self-restraint! after a year of it, what a revised list of besetting sins we should have, to be on our guard against! I for my part have no hankering whatever for the real thing, 'effective & unlimited; honour bright! I am no such fool; I know myself too well to think I could

be trusted; it would take me to issues that are by no means included in the will of this present me, who am to make or not make the wish. But I confess I should like to be a temporary theoretic Gyges, unaware during my year of irresponsibility that it was to have an end, & that at that end the clock was to go back, my good & bad deeds be undone in a flash, & nothing remain of it all but a piece of history written on my brain.

A truly modest little wish, it may be said; why all this elaborate machinery to secure so little? *parturiunt montes*<sup>1</sup>; why not have asked in one word for wisdom, which would have included this trifle as a multi-millionth part of itself? this is 'picking up shells by the great ocean, Truth', indeed.—Ah, but the part is so often more than the whole; that little piece of knowledge that I desire, so valuable by itself, would be swamped & lost in the vast flood you offer me, & go unregarded. Moreover, a conscious creature like man has an irresistible desire to preserve his own identity; one may be, as I am indeed, quite untouched by the horror with which the idea of annihilation is understood to affect some good people, & yet find it intolerable that, so long as one is an entity at all, there should not be identity too; and what identity between a mere groper like one of us & himself raised to inconceivable heights of wisdom? but a modest scrap of extra self-knowledge like what I have imagined—that he could

<sup>1</sup> The mountains are in labour (the product a poor mouse).

endure & yet be himself still; there is eternal truth in the invitation of Peacock's toper: 'Take *a little* more; that is the true quantity'.

In this light, it begins to seem doubtful whether there may not easily be too much of the commercial spirit in making this great choice; perhaps we had better not be exclusively bent on getting the best possible bargain, or at any rate remember that unsuspected elements go towards determining which the best bargain is. But for that, the problem would be exceedingly simple, too simple, almost, to deserve the name of problem at all; ten minutes' consideration would suffice to secure the rejection of such gilt toys as wealth, wisdom, or even health, & one would say, Let me be virtuous! it does not need a Stoic to see that one who had *perfect* virtue would lack nothing that heart can desire; the reason why Stoicism lost its power was that ordinary people discovered how very far the same result was from being attained when the virtue happened, as it invariably did happen, to be something short of perfect. For us dealers in wishes, however, perfect virtue is as easily come by as imperfect, & from the commercial point of view no bargain could be better. Unfortunately it is in no man's power even to wish perfect virtue for *himself*; he can only wish it for a strange creature who is utterly unknown to him; there is even a greater break of continuity between me & this perfectly virtuous person that I am to wish myself than between me

& the perfectly wise; ‘“take *a little* more;” said Seithenyn “that is the true quantity”.’ Perhaps we might carry out his advice by wishing not to be virtuous, but to be every day a trifle more virtuous, or again by wishing to have the wish to be virtuous. Both of these would be within the region of the comprehensible, & have some relation to our present selves, besides which the first would gratify the taste for progress, & the second that for struggle; &, however illogical it may be to question the happiness of perfect virtue after allowing that it includes all that can be desired, yet progress & struggle seem to a good many of us quite indispensable elements of happiness, which without them is inconceivable; there may be such a thing, of course, none the less; but it is a simple impossibility, for one to whom it does not seem desirable, to wish for it. If I am told, on the other hand, that such refinements as wishing for the wish to be virtuous are merely ridiculous, for that everyone has that wish without wishing for it at all, & fails not because he has not the wish, but only because the obstacles are too great, I boldly reply that, on the contrary, hardly anyone wishes to be virtuous; nearly everyone thinks he does; but what he really wishes is something more—to be virtuous without prejudice to certain indulgences that in the meanwhile seem to him still more indispensable than virtue. Speaking for myself, I know that if I really wished to be virtuous, very nearly the whole of my

life would be (according to my present foolish but ingrained notions) most uncomfortably upset; I therefore do not wish to be virtuous, except in some rare fugitive moments. No; the real objection to this wish, modest to absurdity as it sounds, is not that it is too small, but that it is a thousand times too great. If I did ever bring myself to wish it—under our terrible condition, of course, of the wish's being at once realized—it would be at best with fear & trembling; however little I doubt that it would be good for me *per se* to wish to be virtuous, I doubt very much whether it would be good to have acquired the state of mind by irregular means; the same doubt must have suggested itself sometimes to the medievals as they bought off their century or so of purgatory; & I can appeal for support to the bishop who would rather see England free than sober.

The fact is, these vast wishes that would affect almost every detail of life—for wisdom, for virtue, for a virtuous will—are too like unconditional surrenders of freedom; they are as much below the Lucianic materialities in this respect as they are above them in others; one can believe that even the most thoroughgoing determinist, who finds no theoretical difficulty whatever in admitting & maintaining that his freedom is but a name, might shrink in practice from the experiment of bartering it away on this magnificent scale. Perhaps there is something to be said for brushing aside altogether

the natural desire for the best bargain, & asking the first trifle that comes into one's head; Diogenes required no greater boon of Alexander than that he should stand out of his light; & I, as there is a north-easter blowing at this moment, under which my fire always misbehaves, might call in Providence to mend my cowl, & so let all my wishing-privilege evaporate in smoke. But everyone feels that Diogenes was sadly wanting in urbanity on that occasion; I cannot take upon myself to be so unceremonious with Providence; I must try for a compromise, something that will be of serious value to me, yet not shackle my freedom or cut my continuity too severely or completely. Two or three such things suggest themselves. For one, I should like to spend the rest of my life in a perpetually varied moral experiment, having every abstract quality in which I felt any interest highly developed in me for its month. A few of these I have speculated upon in the previous pages; but that was only guesswork; this would be fact; & it would be easy to draw up the list; how vivid & practical would be the system of ethics that I should have composed & issued about my seventieth year! & how inexhaustibly fresh the stale old world would have been all the time! But this reminds me that Ben Jonson, as well as Lucian & Chaucer, has been in these regions. Alas, I shall be confirming the insinuations of those malicious publishers I spoke of earlier; but *Phantaste* is so alive, with me, to the charms of variety that

I cannot shut her out. 'What would *you* wish, Phantaste?' 'Faith I cannot readily tell you what, but methinks I should wish myself all manner of creatures. Now I would be an empress, & by & by a duchess: then a great lady of state, then one of your miscellany madams, then a waiting-woman, then your citizen's wife, then a coarse country gentlewoman, then a dairymaid, then a shepherd's lass, then an empress again, or the queen of fairies; & thus would I prove the vicissitudes & 'whirl of pleasures about & again'.

Or, if it is objected that that is not one wish but a hundred or two, I should like the particular quality of which I believe myself to have more than of any other to be suddenly raised in me to the highest power, just that I might have the satisfaction of knowing how far I had been out in my estimate. Which that is, my reader will I am sure not be so intrusively curious as to expect me to tell him; I will illustrate instead with one in which I am sadly deficient—humour. In spite of my own deficiency I can never reconcile myself to confessing honestly that I have none at all; does any one indeed rightly know whether he has it or not? probably every one who has ever laughed in his life would think himself wronged if he were told that he had not; yet I have a whole class of acquaintance for whom no more convenient label occurs to me than 'wanting in humour'; it would be very diverting, though there might be mortification with

the amusement, if I could steal a peep at *their* secret classifications, & find in how many of them my own name figured under the same heading. Well, a providential gift of abundant humour would give much the same information in a pleasanter way.

Thirdly, in order to avoid that danger of wilfully curtailing one's own liberty which is so formidable, why not wish good things for somebody else instead of for oneself? A much clearer insight into other people's defects, of the glaring kind at least, is granted us than into our own; the very thing that is most completely wanting in me I am probably altogether indifferent to, not knowing of its very existence except by name; but I shall make no such blunder about my neighbour; I can put my finger at once on something that *he* wants badly; & if I generously bestow it on him, he will not have it in virtue of surrendering some of his liberty, as I must have anything I wish for myself; it will have no effect on his *free* will, but be merely a fresh element in the character or circumstances that he has to use. I am not quite sure, though, that the Golden Rule will not have something to say on the subject. How should *I* like somebody else to be planting new qualities in me, or even experimenting on my surroundings, for what he thinks my good? thereafter as I thought him wise or foolish? or is it only the feeble of us that would consent to have a human providence over them,



IF WISHES WERE HORSES

however limited, however wise, & however well-meaning? Let that be considered first.

And now, dear Providence, name your day, & I will see to it that I have picked out from these humbler alternatives, against it comes, one that shall neither be so great as to overpower me nor so trifling as to insult You.



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